

Second Series.

THE
Mysteries
OF THE
Court of London

BY
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The Mysteries

OF

The Court of London

VOLUME VII.

CHAPTER LXXVII.

~~THE WOLVES THROWING OFF~~

THEIR DISGUISE.

In the meantime Louisa had sought the chamber where she had passed the preceding night; and she immediately began to pack up her trunk for departure. Not for an instant did she suspect that the Marquis of Leveson had dared negative her orders to fetch the post-chaise: but still she felt that she should breathe more freely when beyond the threshold of this grand aristocratic mansion, the very atmosphere of which seemed heavy, oppressive, and ominous of the dead lull and stifling closeness which pervades the outburst of the storm.

Scarcely had she finished packing her trunk when Lady Ernestina Dysart entered the chamber.

"My dear Louisa," said the artful woman, assuming a look of such well-feigned sorrow that the maiden was completely thrown off her guard thereby, and began to fancy that she had wronged even the Marquis himself by her suspicions,— "my dear Louisa," repeated her ladyship, in the most soothing, endearing, and sympathetic tone, "I am truly vexed that you purpose to leave us suddenly: but my uncle desires me to say that he will watch for your sister's return home in company with her kind friends Mr. and Mrs. Beckford, and he will let you know through me

when you can come back to London with the certainty of meeting her."

"I am truly grateful," said our heroine, "for this proof of kind consideration on the part of his lordship and yourself;"— but still Louisa spoke with a certain degree of restraint, for she could not give facile utterance to words that came not wholly from her heart.

"Oh! do not thank me for anything which I may do for you," exclaimed Ernestina, "it is a real pleasure to serve so sweet a girl as yourself. And now, my dear Louisa, as it will be a quarter of an hour at least before the post-chaise is ready, I have ordered refreshments to be served up in my own chamber: and thither must you accompany me, so that we may have a few minutes' *tete-a-tete* before you leave."

This proposal was made with so much friendly candour and winning affability that Louisa did not hesitate to accept it. Lady Ernestina accordingly led the way first into the Crimson Drawing-Room, and thence into the adjoining apartment, the elegance of which naturally excited Louisa's admiration, notwithstanding the claims which other and far more serious matters had upon her thoughts. But her patrician guide did not allow her much leisure to contemplate this room, with its luxurious sofas ranged all round the walls, its splendid porcelain vases exhaling delicious perfumes, and its exquisitely chased silver lamp suspended to the ceiling. Opening the door at the farther extremity,

THE MYSTERIES

Ernestina conducted the maiden into the next room, where, as the reader will remember, the carpet was the thickest ever trodden upon, and where the arm-chairs were the most massive ever seen.—provided too with cushions of corresponding proportions.

"This is the anteroom to my own chamber," said the false-speaking and evil-intentioned Ernestina; "and I ordered the refreshments to be served up here. I suppose the footman must have misunderstood me," she continued assuming a tone of vexation. "Sit down, my dear girl," she added affably pointing to a chair: "and I will ring the bell for luncheon."

Louisa unhesitatingly proceeded to place herself where the treacherous lady thus pointed: but scarcely had the young virgin's form made its imprint upon the flocculent cushion, when the sudden click of the secret mechanism was heard and she found herself strangely but alarmingly held captive by means of the springs that clasped her wrists and the steel bands that fastened their gripe upon her shoulders.

The terror of consternation for a few moments sealed her lips: but as she beheld Lady Ernestina suddenly disappear through a door which opened in the wall exactly facing the treacherous chair, the unfortunate girl saw indeed too well that she was betrayed, and a piercing scream burst from her lips. But almost immediately after Ernestina had flitted away so abruptly, and while that rending scream was still vibrating through the suite of rooms, the Marquis of Leveson stood before his intended victim!

He had entered by that same door through which his niece had fled, and closing it behind him, he at once said, in a low but earnest tone, "Louisa, your cries are unavailing: no mortal ear do they reach beyond the four walls of this room;—and therefore I need scarcely observe that you are in my power!"

"My lord, my lord," faltered the maiden, in a dying tone, while her brain grew dizzy and a film came over her eyes "take pity upon the friendless orphan who never injured you!"

"O Louisa!" exclaimed the Marquis, fixing upon her those satyr eyes that were burning with desire—"to ask mercy for yourself is to tell me to make an impossible sacrifice! Listen to me, dear girl—do not despair—do not give way to grief—do not look thus wildly, thus vaguely upon me! You know that I bear one of the loftiest and proudest titles in England—

that my riches are immense: you have seen enough of this mansion here to know that it is spacious and magnificent;—and I may add that in the loveliest sports of England there are country-seats—perfect paradises in themselves—of which I am also the possessor. Of this lofty title, then will I make thee the sharer—of this wealth will I make thee the mistress; my mansions, my domains, my rural villas—all shall be thine, Louisa, if thou wilt give me thy love!"

Our heroine heard the tones of the nobleman's voice, but comprehended not what he said. There was a hurry in her brain that made her thoughts a whirlwind and threw her senses into confusion. All she knew was that some tremendous danger menaced her, and that she was sinking beneath the weight of an ineffable consternation,

The Marquis saw that she was thus overwhelmed—that her head was drooping—and that her senses were slowly abandoning her; and he thought within himself, "I will not excite nor arouse her—I will let her sink into insensibility—and then——"

* * * *

The instant Lady Ernestina Dysart had performed her treacherous part towards poor Louisa Stanley, she disappeared from the presence of the outraged maiden in the manner already described. The reader will have comprehended that she touched the secret spring and opened the invisible door communicating with her uncle's room where indeed his lordship had been awaiting the issue of the adventure.

Hastily telling him that the deed was done, Ernestina traversed the bedchamber and hurried into the Crimson Drawing Room, where she threw herself upon a sofa, palpitating with excitement. For bad, depraved and unprincipled though she was, she nevertheless felt shocked and frightened in the presence of this tremendous iniquity to which she had lent herself.

Not many moments, however, did she thus give way to her painful reflections, ere she was startled by the entrance of a footman, saying, "Sir Douglas Huntingdon requests an immediate interview with either my Lord Marquis or your ladyship."

Ernestina was about to desire the domestic to say that neither she nor her uncle was at home, when the Baronet, who had followed close behind the footman, now walked unceremoniously into the room.

The lacquey accordingly retired: and

this singular behaviour on the part of Huntingdon so increased, or indeed so completely crowned Ernestina's agitation, that, all woman of the world though she was, she felt covered with confusion.

"Pardon this intrusion, my lady," said Huntingdon, who spoke in the tone and with the air of a man bent upon the performance of some decisive part: "but I must see the Marquis immediately."

"My uncle is particularly engaged" faltered Lady Ernestina, a deep blush suffusing her cheeks and running up even unto her forehead, so that it was lost beneath the massive bands of her light brown hair.

"If I cannot see the Msrquis, then," resumed Sir Douglas Huntingdon immediately, "your lodyship will perhaps have the kindness to afford me an interview with Miss Louisa Stanley, who is now staying at Leveson House.

Ernestina gave a visible start as this demand smote her ears: and with the instinctive impulse of a guilty conscience, she cast her eyes rapidly towards the door communicating with the private suite of apartments.

Sir Douglas, who was keenly alive to every look or gesture on the part of the lady, and who saw in her increasing confusion something calculated to excite the most alarming suspicions, failed not to observe that glance which she involuntarily flung towards the door. He was no stranger to the existence of that suite of apartments: as one of the most intimate friends of Lord Leveson, all the treacherous or licentious mysteries thereof were well known to him;—and it was therefore natural that he should now suddenly argue the very worst. He had been told that Leveson was particularly engaged—his visit had evidently overwhelmed Lady Ernestina with confusion and dismay—and that tell-tale look which she had flung at the door of the private chambers, at once seemed to afford a clue to all that was passing.

"Ah! I understand," exclaimed the Baronet: "my friend the Marquis is in those rooms—and as I am no stranger to the mysteries of his mansion, I will, with your ladyship's permission, at once seek him there."

As he thus spoke, Sir Douglas Huntingdon listened towards the door of the private apartments: but Lady Ernestina sprang after him and caught him by the arm, exclaiming, "No, sir you must not intrude upon my uncle's privacy!"

"I am well aware, as a matter of

course," said Huntingdon, "that my behaviour may seem somewhat extraordinary; but it will be your ladyship's fault if it now merge into dawnright rudeness."

"Rudeness! what do you mean, sir?" ejaculated Ernestina, a deeper crimson than before suffusing her face, and her eyes flashing angrily: "you surely, as a gentleman, are incapable of rudeness towards *me* a lady?"

"Then as a lady," cried the Baronet in a stern and even imperious tone such as perhaps he had never used in his life before,— "conduct yourself like a lady, and depend upon it I should never dream of treating you otherwise."

"Again I demand of you, sir, what you mean by this insulting observation?" cried Ernestina, now labouring under a terrible excitement.

"I mean," responded the Baronet, with a significance of look and a determination of manner that made her quail and recoil in dismay,— "I mean that if you prevent me from entering those rooms, I shall suspect that you are acquainted with all the mysteries which they contain: and this will not be highly creditable to you! Moreover, if I discover that anything outrageous or vile is now passing in those rooms, I shall be justified in setting you down as the accessory and the accomplice."

Ernestina fell crushed and annihilated upon a chair, burying her face in her hands: for it appeared to her as if her whole heart was suddenly laid bare in its boundless depravity to the view of that man who addressed her in a tone of such haughty confidence, stern remonstrance, and terrible menace.

The Baronet, having thus silenced and subdued that lady whose complicity in her uncle's licentious proceedings was now too evident, lost no time in opening the door leading into the secret apartments, and which Ernestina had ere now left unlocked after conducting Louisa thither.

* * * *

Meantime the Marquis of Leveson, perceiving that Louisa Stanley was rapidly losing her consciousness, and that she was indeed fainting in that chair which so treacherously held her captive, stood for a few moments gloating upon the charms of which he hoped so soon to become the master. Her head hung down upon her bosom, of which his lustful eyes caught a slight glimpse; and the hands, clasping her shoulders, held her back in such a manner that though her charming head

thus drooped like a flower on its tall slender stalk, yet her form was retained upright in the chair. Therefore his gaze could slowly wander over the graceful symmetry and virgin contours of that exquisite shape,—a shape that possessed all the light and airy elegance of the sylph, with just sufficient fulness to denote that the last stage of girlhood was bursting into the luxuriant bloom and ripeness of womanhood.

But just at the moment when the Marquis of Leveson fancied that our heroine was sinking into a profound insensibility, and while all his detestable passions were boiling up to a frenzied degree at what appeared to be the close consummation of his diabolical project,—just at the instant, in fact, that he believed himself to be touching on his crowning infamy,—Louisa appeared to be startled suddenly back to full consciousness.

Raising her head, she gazed for a moment—a single moment—wildly around her; then, all the tremendous truth flashing to her recollection and all the incidents of her position recurring vividly to her comprehension, she gave vent to another loud, long, and piercing scream.

"Foolish girl! I have told thee that thy cries are vain, said the Marquis, going straight up to her and looking her full in the face. "Will you be mine, I say, voluntarily?—will you yield of your own accord, and accept my hand—my fortune—my title—"

But scream upon scream thrilled from the maiden's lips; and the Marquis, stamping his foot with rage, was bursting forth into violent threat—when suddenly the door between this and the first room of the suite was thrown violently open, and Sir Douglas Huntingdon sprang into the presence of the startled nobleman and his intended victim.

"Release this young lady immediately exclaimed the Baronet, laying his hand upon the collar of the Marquis.

"What! you, Huntingdon, thus to interfere with the pursuits of an old friend?" faltered Leveson, not knowing what to think of the intrusion.

"Let us not bandy words," said the Baronet, sternly: "you see that I am resolute? Come—I understand not precisely the mechanism of this chair—but I command you to release Miss Louisa Stanley forthwith!"

The nobleman saw that Huntingdon was not only in earnest, but also fully bent upon the deliverance of the maiden; and accordingly, with a hand trembling as if

suddenly palsied, the Marquis touched the spring which instantaneously released our heroine from her captivity.

Falling at the feet of Sir Douglas Huntingdon in the enthusiasm of her joy at this sudden and providential liberation, Louisa took his hand and pressed it with all the fervour of her young heart's gratitude. The Baronet hastened to raise her; and fixing his eyes upon the Marquis, who stood by pale and trembling with rage, he said, "Nothing of all this shall be known if you permit Miss Louisa Stanley to depart from your house without any farther attempt of molestation. But if a finger be raised to impede her passage, I will adopt any measure—no matter how much calculated to expose you—"

"Retire then—go—depart," faltered the Marquis, with a strong effort to subdue the violence of his passion: "but I beseech—I implore Miss Louisa Stanley not to betray me—and above all things not to breathe a word to the ruin of my niece!"

Our heroine's heart was too full of joy at her happy deliverance to allow her tongue to utter a word: but Sir Douglas Huntingdon said emphatically, "I promise you, Leveson, on my honour as a gentleman, that nothing of all this shall be revealed elsewhere!"

Having thus spoken, the Baronet hastily conducted Louisa Stanley into the Crimson Drawing Room,—closing behind them the doors through which they passed. Lady Ernestina was no longer there: she had retired in shame, terror, and grief, to her own apartment, leaving the perplexing and menacing adventure to take its own course.

"Miss Stanley," the Baronet now said, the moment they were together in the Crimson Drawing Room; "have the goodness to read this note."

The damsel instantaneously took the billet which was presented to her; and an ejaculation of joy fell from her lips as she recognised her sister's handwriting. Tearing open the note, she read the following words:—

"13, STRATTON STREET,
Nov. 16th, 1814.

"The bearer of this, my ever dear Louisa, is a gentleman in whom you may confide. He will take you away from a place where you are surrounded by manifold danger, and will bring you at once to me."

"Your affectionate sister,
"CLARA."

Words are incapable of describing the delight and happiness which now sprang up in Louisa's bosom, even to the absorption for the time being of her grief on account of her lover's presumed infidelity.

"Then my sister—my beloved sister—is indeed in town," she exclaimed; "and the Marquis deceived me!"

"No, Miss Stanley—he did not altogether deceive you," answered the Baronet: "for if he had not called in Stratton Street ere now, your sister could not of course have known that you were at Leveson House or even in London at all. But the truth is this—your sister was indeed absent from town with Mr. and Mrs. Beckford; but she came back suddenly and alone in order to execute some little commission for Mrs. Beckford. She arrived in Stratton Street only a few minutes after the Marquis had left. Knowing his evil reputation, she was shocked and horrified at the idea of her sister being beneath his roof; and as I happened to call at the moment, she besought me to come with this note which you have just read. My carriage is at the door; and so soon as you are ready, I shall have much pleasure in escorting you to Stratton Street."

Louisa hastened upstairs for the bonnet and scarf, with which she speedily returned to the Crimson Drawing Room, well pleased at encountering neither the Marquis nor Lady Ernestina upon the stairs. Having rung the bell, she ordered the footman who answered the summons to have her trunk taken down to the Baronet's carriage, which was waiting at the door: and when, in a few minutes, the domestic announced that her commands had been executed, she accompanied Sir Douglas Huntingdon from Leveson House.

And now who can describe the feelings of this young, beautiful, and artless girl as she took her seat in the vehicle which was to convey her to that sister from whom she had been separated for five long months? Yet while rolling along in the handsome equipage, she did not forget to renew her thanks to Sir Douglas Huntingdon for the immense service which he had rendered her: but he assured the charming girl that he was only too happy in having arrived at Leveson House so seasonably as to rescue her from the peril in which the darkest and deepest treachery had placed her. Indeed, to tell the truth, as Sir Douglas Huntingdon contemplated with respectful admiration the lovely damsel by his side, he could not help thinking that there was even in the world a pleasure

more genuine and more sweet than to triumph over innocence,—namely, to rescue it from impending ruin!

But neither the Baronet nor Louisa had many minutes for reflection or conversation, inasmuch as the carriage soon dashed up to the door of a handsome house in Stratton Street; and looking forth from the window of the vehicle, our heroine beheld the countenance of her sister at one of the casements of the drawing-room.

In another minute Louisa was clasped—firmly, fondly clasped—in the embrace of that affectionate sister: and not only their kisses, but also their tears were mingled!

CHAPTER LXXVIII.

THE SISTERS.

THE drawing-room where the sisters thus met, was very handsomely furnished, and bore all the evidences of a refined female taste. It was the same room where Jocelyn Loftus had seen Clara Stanley on the occasion of his visit to London, and where she had given her approval of his suit in respect to Louisa.

The sisters were now alone together;—for Sir Douglas Huntingdon had not followed our heroine up into that room, but remained in an apartment below. When the first effusion of joy was over, and the first transports of delight at this meeting were somewhat subsided, Clara and Louisa sate down side by side upon the sofa, and began to contemplate each other with the deepest, tenderest interest.

On the one hand, Clara beheld her younger sister beautiful as ever, and with all that ineffable sweetness of look and innocence of mien which indicated the stainless purity of her soul: she saw her, too, at great advantage—for the pallor and the pensiveness previously occasioned by Jocelyn's supposed perfidy had now yielded to the roseate tinge of joy and the brightness of look which reflected the heart's holiest satisfaction. Clara therefore beheld her sister lovely and loveable as she was when they parted,—one of the chastest and most charming ornaments which the sex ever bestowed upon this world—an incarnation of all the sweetest, truest, and most ethereal attributes which piety or poesy ascribes unto angels!

On the other hand, Louisa beheld her sister more grandly beautiful, more superbly handsome than when they parted under the rose-covered portico of their

Kentish cottage. She saw in Clara a magnificent woman the glory of whose charms seemed to have expanded into a finer and more dazzling bloom in the hot-house of London fashion. Nor less did it strike Louisa that everything at all girlish which might have lingered in the manners or looks of Clara some months back, had now totally departed. The finest gloss of courtly elegance seemed to rest upon her like a charm and hang about her like a spell: there was a grandeur in every movement—a brilliancy in every gesture, softened and subdued only by the polish of an exquisite refinement, and more so by the tenderness of feeling which she now experienced at this meeting with her sister. In a word, our fair young heroine, although she had ever been accustomed to look up to Clara as an elder sister, now regarded her with the deference that mingles in the affection which a daughter experiences for a mother. For Louisa still felt herself a mere girl; whereas Clara looked in every respect, not only the brilliant woman, but also the great lady. Thus Louisa, with her nineteen years and a half, felt as if she were a miss of fifteen or sixteen in the presence of this elder sister—who, though only twenty-one and a half, possessed all the worldly demeanour as well as the luxuriance of charms which characterise the superb matron of at least five or six years older.

Such were the impressions respectively made by this meeting of the sisters: and when they had gazed long and with earnest fondness upon each other, Louisa suddenly exclaimed, "O Clara! are you angry with me for having abandoned my home—for having gone to Paris—and now for having come up to London?"

"Do not talk of anger, dearest girl," said Clara, "while our hearts are yet throbbing with all the first transports of joy at this meeting. Angry with you, dearest Louisa! No, no—it were impossible! not for worlds would I bring a tear into your eyes or change into gloom those smiles which now gleam so sweetly upon your lips! Ah! dearest Louisa, it is as if I were thy mother instead of thy sister that I am now talking to thee: and it is with such a feeling that I rejoice—Oh! I rejoice unfeignedly, to be enabled to pour balm into thy wounded heart!"

"Oh! dearest Clara," interrupted Louisa, surveying her sister with mingled amazement and suspense,—"to what do you allude? Alas! you cannot as yet know my sorrows; because, when I sat down in Paris to commit them to paper and send

you an account of all that had occurred, the pen dropped from my hands! Yes—vainly did I commence letter after letter: each fresh attempt only rendered my heart's wounds more painful—it was like pouring molten lead upon the seared and lacerated flesh! Pardon me, therefore, dear sister, for having thus preserved a silence which may seem unkind—nay, even improper—"

"Enough—enough! dearest Louisa," exclaimed Clara, throwing her arms round her young sister's neck and drawing down that innocent head until it reposed upon her bosom: "from your lips I need no apology—no excuse,—especially as I am well acquainted with much that has occurred. And to keep you no longer in suspense, let me assure you that Jocelyn is innocent!"

"Innocent!" echoed Louisa, her own sweet lips thus repeating in ecstatic joy an assurance which other sweet lips had just breathed in tenderness; "innocent!" she repeated, raising her head suddenly from her sister's bosom, her looks beaming and glittering with mingled joy, hope, and suspense. "Oh! if this were true—if this were true!"—and she clasped her hands with a gesture expressive of ineffable emotions.

"It is as I assure you, my beloved sister," rejoined Clara Stanley. "I would not deceive you for a moment in such a case: no—not for worlds would I deceive you were your heart's best and purest affections are engaged."

"Oh! this is happiness—this is happiness indeed!" murmured Louisa: and flinging herself into her sister's arms, she wept tears of love, and gratitude, and joy, upon her bosom.

"Dear Louisa, this is the sweetest moment that I have experienced for months past," murmured Clara, in a voice that was tremulous and low.

And then *she* also wept: but we cannot say whether the tears that now streamed down her cheeks, welled forth from feelings an unalloyed with pain and as unmixed with self-reproach as those which her sister experienced—that fair, bright, and innocent sister whose tears were moistening Clara's heaving breast with their crystal purity!

"And are you sure—very sure of all this, dearest Clara?" inquired Louisa, again raising her head and bending upon her sister a countenance beaming with smiles of innocence and delight. "But, Oh! yes—I see that you are confident, and I will not ask you to repeat your assurance!"

"Rely upon what I say, dearest Louisa," answered Clara. "If I were not thus confident upon the subject, I would not for a moment venture the assertion: if a doubt existed in my mind, I would rather have left you in the belief of your lover's infidelity, than encourage a hope which after all might turn out to be delusive! Not only is your lover innocent, dearest Louisa—but he is one of the most injured and persecuted of men in all that concerns his imprisonment in the Prefecture of Police, and one of the most virtuous and honourable of young men in all that regards his fidelity towards you and the temptations to which he has been subjected.

"Jocelyn, Jocelyn! to think that I should have mistrusted thee so profoundly!—to think that I should have wronged thee so immensely!" murmured Louisa, shaking her head in despair. "And yet heaven knows that circumstantial evidence which told against thee, Jocelyn was to all appearances crushing and overwhelming! For did not the Prefect himself assure me of dreadful things!—did I not behold with my own eyes a scene too well calculated to make me mistrust thee?—did I not even hear that female's voice proclaim her love for thee?"

"Ah! now, my dearest Louisa," exclaimed Clara, "you are torturing yourself with misgivings, in spite of the certainties which I have breathed in your ears. It is true that I am not acquainted with all the minute details of these matters to which you are alluding: but in general terms I can assure you that your lover is innocent—that he is even of the most rigid virtue—that his purity is incorruptible—and that whatever complexion circumstantial evidence may have been made to assume against him, he will be enabled to clear up every thing!"

"But one word more, Clara," exclaimed Louisa: "one word more—and then farewell to all misgivings! Is he really living under a false name?"

"Yes—that most assuredly he is," exclaimed the elder sister; "and to his honour and credit is this very fact which has been made not only the cause of his arrest, but also one of the grounds of his reproach. But I shall leave to *him*, Louisa, when the time comes, the duty of explaining to you wherefore he has assumed this name of *Jocelyn Loftus* and what his real name is. For I feel assured that these revelations will flow more sweetly upon your ears and sink down more deliciously into your heart, when coming from the lips of a lover, even than from those

of a fond and affectionate sister. And now one word more relative to Jocelyn as we must still continue to call him——"

"Oh! what else have you to say upon this subject?" asked Louisa with renewed suspense.

"That in a short time—a very short time, I hope—he will be free," returned Clara. "Indeed, I am *convinced* that he will soon be liberated: and then, dear girl, he will no doubt rejoice to give you all those explanations which must triumphantly prove his own innocence and dispel all the misgivings that still perhaps lurk in the depths of your soul!"

"He will be free—O heavens! that there may be no disappointment or delay in the fulfilment of this hope!" exclaimed Louisa once more clasping her hands and now gazing upward with a fervid enthusiasm, so that it was easy to perceive that in the depths of her soul she prayed to heaven to verify her sister's assurance.

"Whatever I tell you, dearest Louisa, you may rely upon," rejoined Clara. "And now that I have relieved you from so much anxiety and changed your sorrow into heartfelt joy, you must give me all the particulars of what has occurred to you relative to that journey to Paris and this visit to London."

"I will tell you everything, dear sister," answered the young maiden. "You are well aware, from the letters which I have so constantly written to you, that in the month of September Jocelyn brought Miss Mary Owen with him from London and desired that she might find a home at the cottage?"

"Yes—while he proceeded to the Continent," said Clara, taking up the thread of her sister's discourse, "in order to defeat certain machinations which had been devised against the Princess of Wales, and in which the Owen family was concerned. On all these points your letters were explicit enough."

"And I also told you," continued Louisa "that Jocelyn wrote to me a letter full of love and tenderness from the French capital, stating how he had arrived there in due course and how he had fallen in with Mary's three sisters at Calais whom he had escorted to Paris. I answered his welcome epistle; and he wrote to me another as affectionate as the first. But that was the last letter which I received from him: and then his correspondence suddenly ceased. This was at the end of September."

"And throughout the month of October," observed Clara, "your letters

to me were mournful indeed, You seemed to fancy that your lover had altogether abandoned you——”

“No, no—dearest Clara,” exclaimed Louisa, blushing. “I did not *then* suspect his fidelity: but I was afraid—indeed, I was haunted with the idea, that some terrible calamity had overtaken him——”

“Well, and did I not send you all the consolation in my power?” asked Clara: “did I not conjure you to cherish hope and avoid despair?—although at the time heaven knows that I was utterly ignorant of what had really become of your lover!”

“Had it not been for your soothing and consolatory letters,” said Louisa “I should have become delirious with anguish, or else have been plunged into a blank despair. Well in this manner did the month of October pass mournfully on: and just as it was drawing to a close, I received a letter, dated from Paris, and stating that it was of the highest consequence to me to repair thither without delay in order to learn certain calamitous truths relative to Jocelyn Loftus. That letter, which bore the signature of *An Unknown Friend*,’ desired me to proceed at once to the British Consul on my arrival in Paris, and he would give me farther information. Conceive, my dear Clara, the state of mind into which this letter threw me: and, Oh! *you* were not nigh to counsel me! I felt that it was wrong to leave our poor aunt to the care of a comparative stranger: but on the other hand it would have been madness or perhaps death for me to have remained at home, a prey to the most excruciating suspense!”

“Poor girl!” said the elder sister, hastily wiping her eyes. “No—I was not there to succour you with my advice, although I ought to have been! But go on, Louisa——go on,” she repeated, with a sort of nervous impatience. “I can understand full well how it was that you yielded to the impulse of your feelings and resolved upon repairing to Paris. Under the circumstances I should have done the same: and therefore I do not blame you.”

“Thank you, dear sister—thank you for that assurance!” exclaimed Louisa, smiling through the tears which had started forth upon her lashes as she spoke of her aunt. “Yes—it is as you have said! Driven wild with fearful misgiving—half frenzied and delirious—hurried along as it were by an overwhelming torrent of feeling, I became powerless for anything like calm deliberation. Mary Owen promised to bestow the most unwearied attention

upon my aunt, and to take my place in all tender ministrations towards her. I knew that my young friend was kind-hearted, affectionate, and sincere and I entertained not the slightest apprehension that our afflicted relation would experience neglect at her hands. Thus, after a few very brief preparations, my departure was taken hurriedly; and without any adventure worth relating, I arrived safely in Paris. Immediately on reaching the French capital, I repaired to the British Consul: and when I mentioned my name, he treated me with a kindness of manner so fully reassuring and even paternal that I was struck with the idea that he himself must be the author of the letter which was signed by *an unknown friend*. But in this respect I was speedily undeceived; for, after a few observations to the purport that an excellent and kind hearted English nobleman was really the author of that letter, and was interesting himself in my behalf, the consul directed me to an hotel close at hand, where I was to inquire for the *Marquis of Leveson*. You may well understand my dear Clara, that the moment this name struck upon my ears, it carried a vague and unknown terror into the depths of my soul: for although I had heard but little of his nobleman from the lips of Mary Owen, yet this little was not in his favour.”

Here we must pause for a moment to remind our reader that when Jocelyn had introduced Mary Owen to the cottage at Canterbury, he had carefully forbore from mentioning to Louisa anything beyond the mere outline of the atrocious conspiracy that was a-foot against the Princess of Wales. Especially did he avoid alluding to the infamous means which had adopted to demoralize the minds of the fair daughter of Mrs. Owen: and Mary herself, with a proper feeling of delicacy, never subsequently enlightened Louisa in that respect. Thus the reader will understand that when Louisa heard the name of the Marquis of Leveson mentioned by the British Consul, she knew nothing of the *worst phases* of his character, but only that he was one of the Prince Regent’s confederates in respect to the conspiracy against the Princess of Wales. These circumstances being duly borne in mind, it will be the more easy to comprehend the ensuing details of Louisa Stanley’s narrative.”

“Yes—on hearing that name of *Leveson*,” she continued, after a brief pause. “I felt that it was indeed probable he might know something of Jocelyn and

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of Jocelyn's proceeding, since his lordship was so intimately connected with the machinations and designs of the Prince and so well acquainted with the Misses Owen. Therefore, after thanking the British Consul for his kindness, I at once repaired to the hotel which he had named; and on inquiring for the Marquis of Leveson, I was introduced to his presence. "If you have ever seen him, Clara——"

"Yes—I—I think I must have seen him," observed the elder sister, with a slight appearance of confusion, "But go on. What were you about to say?"

"I was on the point of observing that his lordship is an elderly, if not an old man," continued Louisa; "and his age, added to the paternal kindness with which he received me, naturally inspired me with confidence. Besides, I was too anxious to be relieved of my dreadful suspense relative to Jocelyn, to give way to much misgiving on my own account; and as he doubtless saw by my looks how torturing that suspense was, he at once entered on the painful topic alluded to in his pseudonymous letter. After a suitable preface, he proceeded with every appearance of gentleness and considerate caution, to unfold a long tale of charges and accusations against poor Jocelyn. Thus at his very first words I was so far relieved as to learn that the object of my affections had neither sustained personal injury nor was dead,—between which calamities my frenzied fancy had been cruelly alternating. But, Oh! if I were indeed relieved from that poignant suspense and excruciating alarm, it was only to hear sufficient to prove, as I then thought, that henceforth Jocelyn was unworthy of the love which I had bestowed upon him! Nevertheless, I could not—I would not—I dared not—put implicit faith in the bare word of the Marquis of Leveson, without corroboration and without proof. Nor did he for a moment appear to believe that I should rest satisfied with mere statements unsupported by evidence. He assured me that his only aim was to save me from becoming the victim of an adventurer, and that his conduct towards me was inspired by the feelings which a father might cherish towards a daughter. In a word, my dear Clara, he spoke so kindly, so reasonably, and so conscientiously to all appearance—and then, too, I was so very, very unhappy, so lonely, and so much in want of a friend and adviser—that I readily promised to be guided by his counsel. He bade me remain at the hotel, assigning me to the care of the landlady and her daughters who were

worthy people, and seeing that I was unhappy did their best to console me in my affliction. To be brief, the Marquis took me late that same night in this carriage to the Prefecture of Police; and there, as it appeared to me, I received the fullest, the cruellest, and, Oh! the most fatal confirmation of all, that his lordship had previously told me!"

Louisa Stanley now related to her sister the details of all that she had heard or seen at the Prefecture of Police and which are already well known to the reader.

"My dearest girl," said Clara, "I have already told you that your intended husband does really bear a false name, but that he has assumed it through no dishonourable motives. Therefore, the entry in the Prefect's Black Book is virtually nothing more nor less than a record of a base pretext for a most arbitrary arrest. That the Prefect should have repeated to you the calumnies previously levelled against Jocelyn by the Marquis of Leveson, can be explained either by supposing the French functionary to be as vile as the English nobleman, himself, or else to have been easily misled and deceived by that nobleman. Then, with regard to the third incident which appeared to you a corroborative proof of Jocelyn's perfidy—namely, the occurrences of the prison-chambers—all this doubtless arose from circumstances purposely arranged and combined at a special moment to produce particular effects. There was an aperture, you say in the wall between two chambers, and you were led to believe that this aperture had been formed as a means of communication and intercourse between Jocelyn and the female captive who was his neighbour. But, Ah! Louisa, did you pause to ascertain that Jocelyn was a guilty wretch instead of a victim—the creator of the circumstances in which you found him placed, or the victim of them? In fine, had he invited that female to his chamber?—or had she forced herself upon him? You tell me that when you heard him speak within that second chamber whence the light streamed through the aperture, his words were an ejaculation to the effect *that he should be driven mad*. But was that the cry of love or of despair?—was that the language of a passion traitorous to you, or of a bitter persecution endured by himself? And then, that response from the female to the effect *that she loved him and that he knew she thus loved him*,—might it not have been addressed to him as a reproach and a remonstrance for coldness, aversion, or inaccessibility or

his part? Depend upon it, Louisa, as I ere now said, Jocelyn will give, when you meet again, the fullest and most satisfactory explanations upon all these points."

"Yes, dearest Clara," answered Louisa, in a voice tremulous with emotion, "I indeed see all those incidents in a new light. But what could I think of them at the time? Oh! I was stricken down as if the hand of death had suddenly been laid upon me: I was borne away from the spot—and for several days I remained in a state of delirium at the hotel. But the kindest attentions were shown me by the landlady, her daughters, and the medical attendant: and thus, when my mind began to emerge from the wild confusion of its ideas, I found myself the object of the tenderest solace and sympathy. I wished to hasten back to England—to return home: but the Marquis represented to me the impossibility of my travelling in the nervous and excited condition that I then was; and this representation was warmly seconded by the worthy females to whose care I was assigned. Weak as I was in body and attenuated as I felt in mind, I was over-persuaded without much difficulty. And I have already told you, Clara, how vain were the attempts I made to commit my woes to paper and correspond with you! Thus did day after day pass: and all this while the conduct of the Marquis was so kind, so respectful, and at the same time so fatherly, that I felt assured his character must either have been mistaken or unjustly treated by Mary Owen. To be brief, I experienced the deepest gratitude towards his lordship: I felt that I was indebted to him for being rescued from the snares and influences of an adventurer. But, Oh! while thus I thought in a strain so depreciatory of poor Jocelyn, the scalding tears flowed down my cheeks and I felt as if my heart would burst! It was a relief for me to quit Paris—that place which appeared to be the scene of the fatal rock on which all my fondest hopes were shipwrecked! The Marquis, with a delicacy which entirely confirmed the good opinion I had recently been forming of him, arranged that the landlady's eldest daughter should accompany us as far as Dover, so that I might not be left without female society during the journey. On arriving at Dover, this young Frenchwoman left us to return to Paris, liberally rewarded by the Marquis. Up to this moment, Clara, the idea of proceeding to London had never entered my mind. But as I was journeying with the Marquis from Dover to Canterbury, he

represented to me the propriety and even the necessity of consulting my sister—yourself, beloved Clara—and pouring my sorrows into her bosom after all that had occurred. Ah! need I tell you—need I assure you that it required but little argument to persuade me in the adoption of this course? I nevertheless insisted upon halting at Canterbury to assure myself that our afflicted aunt was properly cared for. "*Mary Owen*," then said the Marquis, "*is deeply prejudiced against me, and fancies that I am engaged in a conspiracy which has no other existence than in her own imagination. She will therefore believe, if you tell her you are travelling with me, that I shall snatch her away from her present retreat and bear her back to her mother. But as I do not wish to interfere with the poor girl, it will be needless for you to create any alarm in her mind. Would it not then be prudent to forbear from mentioning my name to her at all?*"—I yielded to these representations, which appeared to me so natural at the moment;—and besides, my mind was so attenuated that I really had neither the courage nor the power to think for myself, and was therefore easily led to follow any advice that was given to me at the moment by one whom I deemed a friend. I went to the cottage: I learnt privately from the faithful servant girl that Mary Owen had filled my place with the utmost tenderness towards my afflicted aunt:—and Mary Owen herself gave me the assurance that she had neglected nothing in the fulfilment of the duty entrusted to her. Few and rapid were the words that passed between us. I told her that Jocelyn was faithless to me, and a mere adventurer in society. I told her also that her sisters had proceeded to join the Princess of Wales in Italy: and I assured her that I had the best possible means for believing that the conspiracy against that august lady had in reality no actual existence. Mary Owen was astonished at this declaration on my part: she shook her head gloomily—but evidently was at a loss what to think. I told her to suspend all opinion until my return from London, when I would enter into the fullest and minutest details. Then, after this flying visit to the cottage—a visit which lasted for a brief half hour—I returned to the *Fountain Hotel* where the Marquis of Leveson's carriage had stopped. Our journey was then pursued towards London, where we arrived last evening."

Louisa Stanley now proceeded to relate the treatment she had experienced at

Leveson House—how the Marquis and Ernestina had suddenly thrown off the mask, and how the seasonable and sudden arrival of Sir Douglass Huntingdon had saved her from the treachery and outrage which the profligate nobleman had dared to contemplate. The elder sister was more than indignant—she was positively enraged at hearing this recital of the crowning dangers through which Louisa had that morning passed; and she murmured to herself “Lord Leveson shall repent of this black atrocity!”

“And now, dearest Clara,” said Louisa, throwing her arms around her sister’s neck, and gazing upon her with all her young hearts innocent and enthusiastic devotion,—“tell me, dearest Clara, are you yourself happy?—do you like the gaiety and bustle of the metropolis?—or do you long to return to the peaceful retreat at Canterbury? Tell me, in fine, all—everything that regards you.

“Yes, dearest Louisa,” answered Clara, embracing her fondly: “I will tell you everything—and you will perceive that I have all possible reason to be happy. In fact, dearest Louisa, if I have kept until some such occasion as this—I mean until we should thus meet and I could speak to you concerning many, many things which I could not so well have committed to paper—if I have kept all this till now, I say, you will not be angry——”

“Ah! my dearest sister, you have made me so happy,” cried Louisa, “by your assurances relative to Jocelyn, that I am in a humour to behold every thing in this world in the brightest and gayest colours. Yes—a roseate atmosphere now appears to surround me, displacing the murky mist in which I have been living, breathing, moving, and also losing myself as it were, for the last fortnight. Tell me, then, that you are happy, dearest Clara: and that assurance, coming from your lips, will enhance—Oh! unspeakably enhance—the joy which I myself now feel. Yes—and I shall be the more happy, too, if it be possible, because such assurance will convince me that you, my dearest sister have not experienced the blighting, withering influence of that atmosphere of fashion in which you have been moving.”

“What mean you, Louisa?” asked Clara, gazing upon her sister with so singular an expression that had the young maiden been more experienced in the world’s ways, and more deeply read in the science of the human heart, she would immediately have felt uneasy—perhaps dismay—by that look which Clara fixed upon her.

“I mean,” responded the artless, innocent, unsuspecting girl, “that Lady Ernestina Dysart drew ere now such a shocking picture of fashionable life, that she made me shudder.”

“Ah! what did she tell you?” inquired Clara.

“Oh! it was indeed very shocking,” answered Louisa, “and filled me with a sudden aversion for what is called the fashionable world. Lady Ernestina spoke to me of a certain celebrated beauty—I forget her name at this moment——”

“Try and remember,” said Clara, throwing her arms in such a way round Louisa’s neck that she drew the young virgin’s beauteous head down upon her own fine bust.

“Oh! I recollect now,” cried Louisa: “it was Venetia Trelawney.”

“Ah!” said Clara. “And what did Lady Ernestina tell you about her?”

“That she was as depraved as she was beautiful,” replied Louisa, whose cheek still remained pillowed against Clara’s bosom. “But doubtless you are acquainted with everything regarding this Venetia, since her story appears to be the topic of the fashionable world. Only conceive such dreadful depravity as to marry a young, handsome, and clever man and immediately after the honeymoon lend a willing ear to the improper overtures of that wicked, wicked man the Prince Regent! O Clara, if you ever meet this Venetia—or Lady Sackville, as I believe she is now called—I do sincerely hope you will never speak to her. It positively makes my cheeks glow with indignation and also with shame, when I think that the entire sex to some extent shares in the infamy of such creatures. Ah! and *your* cheeks glow also, my beloved Clara,” exclaimed the beauteous girl, suddenly raising her head and observing the deep carnation which overspread her sister’s countenance. “Oh! I was well aware that your noble heart would feel as indignant and also as humiliated as I, to think that the name of Woman should be disgraced by such a shameless profligate as that Venetia.”

“Let us talk no more of this?” said Clara the deep carnation hue suddenly sweeping away from her cheeks and leaving them very pale. “Yes—yes—the atmosphere of London is indeed unfitted for a flower of innocence and purity such as thou—and therefore must we part soon, dear sister, and you must lose no time in returning to Canterbury. Sir Douglas Huntingdon’s carriage will take you to Blackheath or Dartford, where you can

obtain a post-chaise and as it is now but two o'clock, you will reach Conterbury to-night ere it be very late."

"You seem, dear Clara, as if you wished to hurry me suddenly away?" said Louisa, the tears rolling down her cheeks.

"No—do not think me unkind, my sweet sister," returned Clara: "but I feel that London is not fitted for you—Oh! no, it is not fitted for *you*—and God in his mercy forbid that it ever should be," added Clara, with a strong emphasis.

"Well, dear sister," observed the younger girl, as she wiped away her tears, "I will do as you desire. But recollect that you have not as yet told me one word relative to yourself: and you ere now led me to believe that you had many things to tell me—yes, even secrets, which you had not chosen to commit to paper, but for which you awaited the opportunity of our meeting."

"Oh! I have nothing to tell you of such great importance as you seem to imagine," said Clara, with a smile, which did not however appear to take its inspiration from the full glow of a heart's unalloyed happiness. "You know that fond, loving, and affectionate sisters such as we are, always have a hundred little trifles and sweet nothings to tell each other, and which they treasure up for the day of meeting——"

"Then you have really nothing of importance to tell me?" said Louisa, with a tone and look of disappointment. "I thought you were perhaps going to reveal to me some matters indicative of your own complete and consummate happiness."

"No—that is to say I mean yes," ejaculated Clara, somewhat falteringly: then in a hurried tone, she added, "But I have already told you, by the bye, in my letters, that my dear kind friends, the Beckfords, have adopted me as their daughter, and intend to leave me all their fortune."

"Yes—you have already told me this," said Louisa; "and I have congratulated you in return: for of course you are well aware, Clara, that your happiness is as dear to me as my own—or even dearer: for I would endure anything sooner than be compelled to hear that you were unhappy."

"Dear Louisa—dear, dear girl," cried Clara, embracing her fervidly and fondly; "and be assured—Oh! be assured, that I entertain precisely the same feeling for you! But we must now part. Louisa—we must indeed: for it is time that you should return homeward; I am also compelled to

leave town again immediately to rejoin Mr. and Mrs. Beckford—otherwise I would accompany you part of the distance. But I repeat, Sir Douglas Huntingdon will escort you in his carriage as far as Blackheath—or perhaps Dartford—where he will see you safe in a post-chaise."

The sisters now separated with many reiterated embraces, and also with many tears: and once more was Louisa consigned the care of Sir Douglas Huntingdon. We need only add that the Baronet fulfilled his mission with delicacy and fidelity. He escorted her to Dartford, where she procured a post-chaise for her accommodation: and on parting from the lovely girl he experienced a sensation of ineffable joy to think that he had never once regarded her otherwise than with the utmost respect. 'Tis said that the lion crouches at the feet of a spotless maiden: and assuredly the gay libertine—the lion of human society—acknowledged the power of virtue and the empire of innocence on the present occasion!

Louisa reached home between ten and eleven o'clock at night, without experiencing any further adventure worthy recording: but it was far otherwise with Sir Douglas Huntingdon, as will appear in the following chapter,

CHAPTER LXXIX.

SHOOTER'S HILL.

Having acquitted himself thus honourably of the duty confided to him, the Baronet remained to dine at the principal hotel at Dartford; and as his horses had done good service during the day, they required ample leisure for bait and rest. He did not therefore hurry himself as to the hour of departure; and moreover, he fell in with agreeable company in the coffee-room of the tavern. For there had been a steeple-chase in the neighbourhood in the morning; and several sporting characters who had taken part in the barbarian "amusement," were now winding up the day's diversions with a good dinner and a jovial glass at the hotel. The Baronet, who liked such company and loved his bottle also, was therefore induced to remain with the convivialists until a somewhat late hour: indeed, it was considerably past ten o'clock when he ordered his carriage to be got ready—and another half-hour elapsed ere he had finished his wine, paid his bill, and set out on the journey homeward.

The footman who was in attendance on the vehicle sat next the coachman on the box; and as the night was very dark, the carriage-lamps had been lighted. But a dense mist, arising from the Thames, was borne by a sluggish northerly breeze over the southern bank of the river, enveloping the main road which the equipage was pursuing. The lamps accordingly shone as dimly as if through the dullest ground-glass; and the feeble glimmering thus thrown forth, was barely sufficient to enable the coachman to avoid the hedges, banks, ditches, or fences which by turns skirted the road.

The carriage accordingly proceeded at a leisurely pace; and Sir Douglas sank into a sound sleep under the influence of the liquor he had imbibed at Dartford. It was close upon midnight when the equipage began the long, tedious, and gloomy ascent of Shooter's Hill—that spot which, until a very recent period, was so memorable for the exploits of highwaymen. Still the Baronet dozed on upon the comfortable cushions of the carriage: but all in a moment he was startled from his sleep by the abrupt stoppage of the vehicle followed by the instantaneous plunging of the horses, together with several rough voices speaking menacingly.

Letting down the window, the Baronet became aware that his carriage was attacked by robbers: and having no weapons of any kind with him, he was unable to offer the slightest resistance. Besides which, the night was of such impenetrable gloom that he could literally see nothing of what was going on: but the voices which he heard enabled him to comprehend in a moment that his servants were overpowered, and that the ruffians were menacing them with death if they dared make any farther noise.

Thus far all that had happened since the Baronet was startled from his nap, was the work of a few seconds: and putting forth his hand, he was about to open the door when a couple of fellows came up to the windows. One of them immediately seized the carriage lamp on that side, and thrust it into the vehicle, turning it in such a way that its light fell upon the Baronet's countenance.

"He's a good-natured looking feller," said one in a gruff voice; "and so I suppose he'll stand summut handsome."

"To be sure he will, Bob," answered the other ruffian. "Now, sir," he continued, addressing himself to Sir Douglas, "your watch, your rings, yours diamond breast-pin, and as a matter of course, your

purse! If not by fair means, we will have them by foul;"—and he placed a double-barrelled pistol so close to the Baronet's forehead as to cause him to tremble in spite of himself.

"Now, then, be quick, you sir," said the other ruffian, who had been addressed as Bob. "Don't frighten the gentleman out of his senses, Buttoner."

"Well, I don't want to, if so be he'll only make haste," observed the individual thus addressed, as he withdrew the pistol from the close vicinity of the Baronet's countenance.

Sir Douglas, perceiving that resistance was vain, nevertheless hoped that if he could only keep the villains, in parley, succour might arrive.

"Now, my good fellows," he accordingly said, surveying their countenances by the dim light of the carriage-lamp, and observing that one was a villainous looking man with a black patch over the eye, and that the other, who was called the Buttoner, was a jovial, well-favoured person,—"now my good fellows, I am quite ready to surrender up everything I have about me, if you like: but as I value my watch and my rings, I will pay you a fairer price for their ransom than you will get for them if you take them from me."

"Well, let's first look at the purse," said Bob—the fellow with the black patch over his eye, and who was no other than the Durrynacker to whom the reader was introduced at Bencull's dark crib.

The Baronet accordingly drew forth his purse which was found to contain something more than twelve guineas.

"Well, this here ain't no great shakes," cried the Buttoner. "I say, Ben," he exclaimed, raising his voice and turning his head away from the window, "the gentleman proposes a compromise for the yack, the fawneys, and so on."*

"Well, let it be so," said a hoarse thick voice in reply: and this indeed was none other than Mr. Bencull speaking, and who was mounting guard on the box over the coachman and footman.

"Very good," said the Buttoner. "Now, sir, please to step down:—and thus speaking, he opened the door of the carriage and lowered the steps.

"But where am I to go?" demanded the Baronet.

"Never do you mind," answered the Buttoner: "come along with us—that's all."

"Oh! if it be necessary to go any dis-

* Yack, watch—fawneys, rings.

tance, I would sooner give up my personal property at once," said the Baronet, who had thus involved himself in a dilemma which he little anticipated when proposing the compromise: "or else, can I not write you a cheque upon my banker on a leaf torn out of my pocket-book."

"No, no, sir—we don't do business in that way," responded the Buttoner, sharply. "You was the first to propose the compromise; and therefore we'll stick to it. Now then, how is it to be?" he demanded, again appealing to his confederate on the box.

"Oh! let your young woman manage it, replied Bencull.

"Be it so," said the Buttoner; then addressing himself in hasty and imperious terms to the Baronet, he continued, "Now, sir, you will give your servants orders to pay a hundred guineas to the bearer of a letter from you to that effect to-morrow morning; and you will tell them that if so be the young woman doesn't come back with the money by one o'clock to-morrow afternoon, we shall take it for granted that there's been foul play and that she's been took into custody: so that without more ado we shall draw a knife across your throat—do you understand, sir?"

"Yes—yes—perfectly well," replied the Baronet, uncommonly annoyed at the turn the adventure was taking, and inwardly cursing himself for not having surrendered up his jewellery without the suggestion of a compromise. "But you surely don't intend to hold me as a hostage until to-morrow afternoon?" he said, in a tone that betrayed his vexation.

"By jingo, but we do though!" exclaimed the Buttoner. "So no more palaver—but give your orders to your servants, and let the carriage depart."

"Well, since there is no help for it, be it as you say," observed the Baronet, with a philosophical resignation to an adventure which after all threatened to be more inconvenient than perilous: then addressing himself to the footman, he said "James you have heard what has taken place, and you will tell the housekeeper to pay the hundred guineas to any person who shall present a letter from me to-morrow morning to that effect. You will likewise tell Mrs. Baines that the person presenting such letters is to receive no molestation nor hindrance."

The footman promised a faithful attention to his master's orders: whereupon Bencull relieved that lacquey and the coachman from the terrors of his presence on the box and the imminence of his

pistols—and the instant he alighted the carriage drove rapidly away.

The whole of this scene did not occupy above five minutes, the colloquy which has taken us so long to record having passed with all the haste and hurry of the accompanying excitement.

And now, while the carriage was proceeding on its course, with the coachman and lacquey congratulating themselves on their escape, the Baronet was seized upon by the three ruffians and hurried into the thicket skirting that side of the road which was farthest from the Thames. Through the deep impenetrable darkness did the robbers conduct their captive, to whom it was evident by the rapid and unhesitating pace at which they advanced, that they were perfectly familiar with the locality. Such indeed was the case: for they were pursuing a beaten pathway through the wood, and in which they were enabled to keep with precision, inasmuch as the sinking of their feet on the damp ground on either side at once made them aware when there was the slightest divergence from that well-trodden path.

For upwards of a quarter of an hour did they thus proceed at a rapid rate. No violence was offered to the Baronet: but a firm grasp was kept upon him, in order to prevent his escape. Scarcely a word was spoken as they thus proceeded through that night of pitchy gloom; and at the expiration of the interval just named, a dim light was observed twinkling a little ahead. In two or three minutes the party halted suddenly at the door of what appeared to be a cottage, or hut, and whence the light had emanated.

The door was opened by another ill-looking rascal, who, we may as well observe at once, was the Mushroom Faker—another of the delectable company whose acquaintance our readers have made at Jacob's Island.

The Baronet was now introduced into a rude and dilapidated room, furnished with one or two benches and a couple of tables made of the roughest materials. The entire aspect of the place was of the most wretched and cheerless description. On one table stood a bottle, a glass, a plate, and a huge knife with a buck-horn handle: for the Mushroom Faker had only just concluded his supper at the moment when his companions arrived with their captive.

"Sit down, sir," said the Buttoner, "and make yourself at home. I suppose there's some kind of lish here," he continued, taking up the bottle and holding it against the flame of a tallow candle with

a long flaring wick. "Yes, to be sure there is:"—and filling the glass with brandy he tossed the dram down his throat. "Now, sir, pray help yourself to this here lush; and I can promise you'll find it excellent. In fact you must make yourself as comfortable as you can, while I go and see what my young woman can do eowards accommodating you for the night.

The Baronet made no reply, but threw a look of bitter annoyance round the room, and of a disgust upon the Buttoner, then seating himself on a rough stool at the clumsy table, he once more endeavoured to soothe his annoyance and resign himself to the temporary inconveniences of this position,

The Buttoner opened a small door and ascended a narrow staircase, which creaked and groaned beneath his heavy tread—while Bencull, Bob the Durrynacker, and the Mushroom Faker sat down at the second table and began drinking as fast and furiously as if they had never tasted strong waters before in their lives. It was notwithstanding pretty evident that there was no lack of the alcoholic fluid in the hut, as indeed the numerous bottles which appeared on the shelves of an open cupboard satisfactorily proved.

In a few minutes the Buttoner came down-stairs again; and presenting a sheet of paper, writing materials, and sealing wax to the Baronet, he said, "Now, sir, you'll please to draw up at once that there letter which is to be delivered to your housekeeper—Mrs. Baines, I think you called her cos why, my young woman will get up precious early in the morning, so as to be at your house in town, wherever it is, by eight or nine o'clock."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon immediately proceeded to pen the requisite instructions for the payment of the hundred guineas to the bearer; and having affixed his signature to the letter, he was about to seal it when the Buttoner leant over his shoulder, observing in a coarse tone of familiarity. "Beg pardon, sir—but I must see what you have wrote, if you please."

"By all means," observed the Baronet, scarcely attempting to conceal his disgust. "But if you did not mean me to close the letter, why did you bring the sealing-wax."

"I fancied you would rayther seal it." was the reply; "so that when delivered at your door to-morrow morning, it won't be read by no one but her as it is addressed to. But all this isn't no reason why I shouldn't see aforehand what the letter

really contains. Howsumever, it's all right—and so now you can seal it."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon accordingly secured the letter: and having duly addressed it to Mrs. Baines, his housekeeper in London, he gave it into the hands of the Buttoner. This individual once more hurried up the narrow rickety staircase, at the top of which was a bedroom—if a place with a quantity of dirty flock scattered upon the floor, a wretched coverlid, a rudely constructed table, a chipped bason, and a cracked ewer, deserves such an appellation.

In this wretched apartment Nell Gibson was seated. A bottle of spirits and a glass stood upon the table; and as the light of the solitary candle played flickeringly upon her countenance, it showed that her features were slightly flushed with drinking. Her apparel was in striking contrast with the miserable aspect of the place. She wore gold ear-rings: a silk boddice, fitting close to her shape, displayed the luxuriant proportions of her figure;—her arms were bare to the shoulder—and the short skirts of her dress revealed her well-formed ankles up to the swell of the leg. A handsome bonnet and scarf lay upon the bench where she was seated; and when the Buttoner re-appeared this second time in the chamber, she was counting a few guineas which she had taken from a new silk purse.

We have already informed our readers that there had been a grand steeple-chase in the neighbourhood that morning; and great numbers of persons had been attracted to the vicinage of Shooter's Hill, not only from the adjacent towns of Dartford, Woolwich, and Greenwich, but also from the metropolis. To take advantage of this opportunity of displaying their particular genius and exercising their craft, Bencull, the Durrynacker, the Buttoner and Nell Gibson had appeared upon the scene; while the Hangman, Sally Melmoth and Jack the Foundling had likewise paid a visit to the same neighbourhood and for the same purpose. Of course the two parties had thus met in pursuance of previous arrangement: but we shall not pause to describe the various ways in which all these worthies, male and female turned the proceedings of the day and the presence of a large concourse of people, to their own special advantage. Suffice it to say that they managed to reap a very tolerable harvest; and when evening came the two parties took a very friendly leave of each other. On the one hand, Daniel Coffin, Sally Melmoth and Jack the Foundling

repaired to a small lonely but convenient ale-house at a short distance amongst the fields, to take up their quarters till morning: while, on the other hand, Bencull, the Buttoner, the Durrynacker, and Nell Gibson had already arranged to pass the night at the rude hut in the immediate vicinage of Shooter's Hill.

Now the hut belonged to no less a personage than the Mushroom-Faker. The reader will scarcely require to be told that it was a very convenient haunt for such personages as those just named; and accordingly, when business was slack at Jacob's Island, they often sought the rude hut for the purpose of seeing what they could pick up by nights on Shooter's Hill. It was also a retreat for any member of the fraternity whom circumstades compelled to "keep out of the way" for a while;—and suspicion was averted from the place by the maintenance of an air of the most abject poverty. The gamekeepers of the district fancied that it was occupied only by a poor inoffensive umbrella-mender, who was frequently absent on long journeys: whereas, in reality it was the scene of many crimes and the hiding-place of many criminals.

We need only add in explanation of present incidents, that Bencull, the Durrynacker, and the Buttoner, flushed with the success of their proceedings amongst the crowds collected for this steeple-chase in the morning, had resolved not to allow the night to pass without "trying their luck," on Shooter's Hill. Hence the stoppage of the Baronet's carriage and the circumstances which led to his introduction to the hut.

We stated that upon ascending the stairs a second time, the Buttoner found Nell Gibson counting her money: and as he tossed her the letter which he had just received from the Baronet down-stairs, he said, "Here, gal, is the dokiment that will produce a hundred guineas to-morrow morning,"

"So much the better," observed the young woman, with a smile of satisfaction "this is something like a night's adventure. Let me see—there's five of us—that will be twenty guineas apiece, because although you and me are now as good as one, yet we go shares as two."

"Oh! to be sure," said the Buttoner; "that's understood! You'll have to start off precious early in the morning, Nell, so as to deliver that letter by eight or nine o'clock, and make sure of the money. Nöt that it matters much, so far as the swell cove his self is concerned: for we don't

mean to part with him quite so easy. In fact," added the Buttoner, lowering his voice to a whisper, "we don't mean to part with him at all."

"Then what *do* you mean?" asked Nell, in her usually quiet way, as if it were impossible for her to be surprised, started, or alarmed by any announcement that could be made or any plan that could be revealed.

"Why, the swell cove has got such a handsome yack and chain, such beautiful fawnys, and such a sweet breastpin—besides which, his toggery is so precious good—that it would raly be a sin to let such wallyables slip through our fingers. And therefore," added the Buttoner, in a still lower whisper and with an ominous look, "we mean to put him wery comfortably out of the way. Besides, dead men tell no tales—and since he has seen all our precious faces and would have no trouble in recognising us again, it's much better to give him his gruel."

"Who is he?" asked Nell Gibson. "Do you know his name? Because if he happens to be any great person, there would be such a precious piece of work that no stone would be left unturned till his fate was discovered."

"To be sure I know who he is," returned the Buttoner. "You don't think I should have been fool enough to let him seal up that there letter afore I read it through? But I say, Nell, you don't object to having this swell cove made away with—do ye?"

"Not I indeed," returned this young woman who beneath a handsome exterior concealed the implacable and remorseless spirit of a fiend. "And even supposing I did object, I know very well that if Bencull has once made up his mind, neither heaven nor earth could move him to the contrary."

"Well, he has then, I can tell you," returned the Buttoner: "for although not a word has passed our lips on the subject, yet me and him and the Durrynacker and Mushroom Faker, have settled the pint with our looks."

"I suppose you will wait till I come back to-morrow to say whether I have got the money or not?" observed Nell Gibson.

"There's no use waiting at all," answered the Buttoner. "Whether he's alive or dead at eight o'clock to-morrow morning, won't make no difference in your getting the money: and as for sticking a knife in a feller in cold blood during the day-time I raly couldn't do it. It's all

wery well at night, when one has had plenty of lush to make one pluck——”

“Well, you know best—and it’s quite the same to me,” interrupted Nell Gibson with a yawn. But after all you haven’t told me what his name is,” she observed carelessly as she turned the letter over and over in her hand.

“*Douglas Huntingdon* the signature is,” answered the Buttoner. “But what’s the matter, Nell?” he demanded, as she suddenly dropped the letter on the floor.

“Nothing. Why do you ask?” she inquired, stooping down to pick up the letter: then having done so, she looked up in the Buttoner’s face, saying, “Why did you ask me that question, I repeat?”

“Because I thought you started and looked queer all of a sudden,” was the response.

“Not I indeed,” she observed in an off-handed manner, as she steadily met this keen searching gaze which the Buttoner fixed upon her for a few moments. “Do you think he suspects he is in any danger?” she asked: “because if so, it would be well to lull him into security.”

“That’s just what I want,” responded the Buttoner. “I shouldn’t like for us all to have to set upon him while he’s awake, and so massacre him as one may say. I had much rather that he would lie down and go to sleep—and then we could do his business all quiet and comfortable, without leaving no tell-tale stains about the place. In fact, I told him just now that I would come up-stairs and see what accommodation my young woman could make for him.”

“Well, why don’t you go and tell him he can have a bedroom, such as it is?” said Nell Gibson. “Or I tell you what,” she added, a thought suddenly appearing to strike her, “if you like I’ll go down stairs and invite him to come up here.”

“Well, do so if you fancy you’ll succeed,” replied the Buttoner. “There’s no harm in trying it on.”

“No harm at all,” echoed Nell Gibson: and with this observation she descended to the room below, the Buttoner remaining up-stairs.

The moment she made her appearance in the lower apartment, she threw a rapid look of intelligence upon Bencull, the Durrnacker, and the Mushroom Faker, who were boozing at one table, while she advanced towards the Baronet who was still seated at the other. The three villains understood by this look that she had some project in hand; and they therefore affected to take no particular notice

of her. This was precisely what she wanted: her object was to divert their attention or at all events cause them to look aside for a moment while she had an opportunity of making a sign of intelligence to the Baronet. Indeed had she not by such a sign enjoined him to hold his peace, an exclamation of astonishment would have burst from his lips: for Nell Gibson was indeed no stranger to him—and he had instantaneously recognised her!

Yes—her form was fuller and grosser, her looks were bolder, and her mien was more brazen than when he saw her last: nevertheless, he failed not to recognise in an instant that countenance which he had once admired, and that form whose virgin charms had been despoiled by him!

The ejaculation, then, of amazement which was about to burst forth, died upon his lips as he caught that signal which she made him: and instantly perceiving by her manner that she had in view some purpose which she wished to conceal from the ruffians at the other end of the room, he suddenly assumed an air of perfect composure, so as not to betray that any secret intelligence existed between them.

“You are sure, sir,” she said holding up the letter, “that this document will meet with proper attention to-morrow morning?”

“I am certainly of it,” he replied. “The men who brought me hither, overheard the instructions which I gave to my servants ere they departed with the carriage——”

But while Sir Douglas Huntingdon was thus speaking, Nell Gibson said in a low rapid whisper, “*Fly hence, I conjure you?*”

Startling as these words were, inasmuch as they revealed to him in a moment all the dangerous of his position, he nevertheless had the presence of mind to continue speaking the sentence which we have recorded;—and thus his voice drowned the whispered accents of the female.

“Well, sir,” she said aloud, as if in answer to the observation which he had made,—“I do hope that it will not be a wild-goose chase that I shall have to-morrow morning. And now, sir, as you have got to stay here all night, I am sent to propose that you walk upstairs and lie down.”

But as she thus spoke, she gave a slight and just perceptible shake of the head, as much as to tell him *not* to accept her offer.

“Thank you, young woman,” he said

aloud, with a look which showed that he not only experienced a full sense of the danger of which he had made him aware, but likewise the deepest gratitude towards herself,—“than you, young woman, I would rather rot. Presently when I feel tired—I will avail myself of the offer.”

And while Sir Douglas was thus speaking, in such a manner as perfectly to cover Nell's whispered accents, she breathed in the lowest tone the following words;—*“The door is not fastened—watch your opportunity—seize that knife—and escape!”*—then, immediately afterwards, she said aloud, and in a calm placid voice “Would you like anything to eat sir? We have provisions in the place, and because you are a prisoner for a few hours, there's no reason why you should be starved.”

“No, I thank you—I require nothing,” responded the Baronet: and as he threw a rapid, furtive, sidelong glance towards the three men, at the other end of the room, he saw in the sinister signs they were making together, a horrible confirmation of the dire alarms which Nell Gibson had excited in his breast.

“I wish you good night, sir,” she said: and darting upon him another look of intelligence, she turned away.

One authority he staircase to the chamber herself. — in the presence of

“What must we do?” — his resolute paramour; “why, if our pals come back without the swell cove, we must get away from her as quick as ever we can. Who knows but what he may cut across to Greenwich and come back at once with a whole posse of constables? Or perhaps he may meet some travellers on the road—”

“Aye, truly!” cried Nell, affecting to be very seriously alarmed. “Let us go away at once. There's no use in staying here to be taken. Bencull and the others will know very well how to shift for themselves. Suppose we go down to the *Jolly Waggoner*, where Daniel Coffin and his party are.”

“Well, go up-stairs and put on your toggery,” interrupted the Buttoner, really beginning to think that it was high time to make themselves scarce.

“Nell Gibson accordingly tripped up to the room above: but scarcely had she adjusted her bonnet and thrown her flaunting scarf over her previously much exposed shoulders and bosom, when she heard the sounds of voices below—and recognising Bencull's hoarse tones, she hastened down-stairs again, sick at heart with the apprehension that Sir Douglas had been retaken.

and, behold! they settled on stains which instantaneously struck him to be those of blood. His looks were startled away from that hideous point of view and as they swept in frightened rapidity around, they caught other stains upon the wooden wall which likewise appeared to be the marks of blood!

Shuddering to the very confines of his being, the Baronet felt as if he were indeed looking Death face to face. The pitch darkness of the night that hung like a sable pall against the cottage-window—the awful stillness that prevailed around—the utter loneliness of that hut—the evil reputation of the neighbourhood—the deep solemn hour of midnight—and then those villanous countenances which seemed more sinister and diabolical still as the faint flickering light played upon them, all these influences and circumstances combined to fill his soul with a fearful consternation and a horrible dismay!

Scarcely a quarter of an hour had elapsed since he had refused in disgust the dram of brandy which the Buttoner had offered to him; but now he hastened to pour it out and greedily swallow it to revive his drooping courage. In a moment the burning fluid appeared to flash like lightning through his veins: it was the spark to a whole train of excitement which had been dangerous.”

Bencull accordingly bore the beautiful girl in his arms to the chamber above; while Nell Gibson followed with the bundle which she took from the Mushroom Faker who was carrying it. The fair stranger was deposited softly and gently upon the heap of flock; and Nell Gibson, stooping down, unfastened her bonnet, which was much crushed, so as to give her air. A luxuriant profusion of soft and fine flaxen tresses now flowed over the wretched coverlid, whereon reclined the damsel's beautiful head: and though all tint of vital colouring had fled from her countenance, leaving it marble pale, and her eyes were closed as if in death: so still were the long brown lashes that rested on her cheeks, yet was there an air of such Madonnalike sweetness and angelic beauty about this lovely girl, that only a heart so intensely selfish as that of Nell Gibson, or so brutally ferocious as that of Bencull, could have remained inaccessible to the soft stealing influence and silent magic of such charms.

The damsel was tall, slender, and of sylphid symmetry. Her apparel, though exceedingly plain, was very neat; and as she lay stretched upon that sordid couch,

tive: and these cries of rage reaching the chamber above, told Nell Gibson that the Baronet had escaped, and startled the Buttoner with the conviction that something was wrong. Rushing down the stairs, he found the lower room empty and the door wide open: and he was about to dart forth and join in the pursuit, when an idea that flashed to his brain, struck him as it were with the sudden blow of a hammer, and made him stop short in the midst of his furious excitement, as a drunken man is sobered all in a moment by some fearful announcement.

CHAPTER LXXX.

THE FAIR STRANGER.

The thought which thus suddenly arrested the steps of the Buttoner and transfixed him to the spot, was that Nell Gibson had betrayed the murderous project to the Baronet.

Our readers will remember a certain conversation which took place a fortnight previously to the present date of our story, between Bencull and the Hangman relative to the employment of Nell Gibson to lead Larry Sampson into a trap. It will likewise be borne in mind that "to make sure doubly sure," in a scheme of so dangerous and delicate a character, they had resolved to plant the Buttoner as a spy upon Nell Gibson's action. Being well provided with cash and good clothes, the Buttoner had found these proofs of prosperity to be immediate passports to the favour of Miss Gibson; and he accordingly took up his abode with her at Mrs. Young's delectable establishment in Bermondsey. He and Nell were therefore living as husband and wife together; and we have already shown how it was that they happened to be at the hut near Shooter's Hill on the night of which we are writing.

Now, be it observed that the Buttoner was expressly employed and also bribed by Bencull and the Hangman to watch Nell Gibson's conduct. This circumstance was alone sufficient to render him far more susceptible of misgiving than he otherwise would have been, and more liable to entertain suspicion at the slightest appearance of anything mysterious or sinister. Thus when he suddenly recollected how Nell Gibson had started, and how strange she had looked for a moment when he mentioned the Baronet's name to her, he was

struck by the idea that she had played the traitress.

Instead, therefore, of rushing out in pursuit of the fugitive, the Buttoner turned back from the threshold of the hut, and faced Nell Gibson just as she reached the bottom of the stairs down which she had followed him.

"You see this swell cove has escaped," he said, fixing his eyes upon her with a keenness that appeared to penetrate her through and through.

"I see it indeed," she answered, encountering his gaze with an unwavering steadiness, although upon her cheek there seemed to be a slight, slight changing of colour, and on the lips the least, least twitching of nervousness.

"What did you say to him just now, Nell?" inquired the Buttoner, scarcely knowing what to think, but at all events too uncertain as to her manner to feel justified in accusing her point blank on the spot.

"I merely asked him whether he was sure that the money would be paid to-morrow morning," replied Nell, perceiving that she was suspected, but still maintaining an air of perfect self-possession; "and when he had assured me that there would be no mistake on that head," she continued, "I asked him whether he chose to lie down to rest or to partake of any refreshment."

"And that was all that took place?" said the Buttoner, still keeping his eyes steadily fixed upon her.

"That was all," she answered, the colour neither coming nor going now upon her cheeks, nor her lip betraying even the slightest uneasiness. "But whatever mischief may follow from this escape," she observed in a tone of vexation mingled with reproach, "you and the others have only got yourselves to thank for it. You should have made the door fast, and not left the bird an opportunity to fly out of his cage."

"By jingo! what you say is true enough, Nell," exclaimed the Buttoner, feeling how justly merited was the remonstrance: then advancing to the door, which still stood wide open, he listened with suspended breath while with straining eyes he endeavoured to penetrate the pitchy blackness of the night.

"Well, can you hear anything?" asked the young woman, as he turned back again from the door, leaving it however wide open.

"Nothing—not even the rustling of the branches," he replied, with a terrible

imprecation. "Do you know, Nell, this is a very serious business and may end cursed-badly? Like infernal fools that we were, we once or twice let slip each other's names, and so, what with knowing these, and being able to describe our precious faces, this swell cove if he makes good his escape, will be able to give such information against us as shall make London too hot to hold us. Then, my eyes! won't Larry indeed have something to be down upon us for!"

"How provoking," ejaculated Nell Gibson; "and just at the time, too, that I was getting Larry Sampson into such a nice state of credulity, that a few days more would entice him into the trap as safe and sure as possible!"

"Yes—it is deucedly provoking," growled the Buttoner: and once more he went to the threshold and listened attentively. "There's not a sound, not even the waving of the trees," and again turning away from the door, he tossed off a bumper of brandy.

"What must we do?" inquired Nell, appearing to be very uneasy, although in her heart she knew full well that the Baronet would not be guilty of such black ingratitude as to give any information to the authorities calculated to compromise herself.

"What must we do?" echoed her paramour; "why, if our pals come back without the swell cove, we must get away from her as quick as ever we can. Who knows but what he may cut across to Greenwich and come back at once with a whole posse of constables? Or perhaps he may meet some travellers on the road—"

"Aye, truly!" cried Nell, affecting to be very seriously alarmed. "Let us go away at once. There's no use in staying here to be taken. Bencull and the others will know very well how to shift for themselves. Suppose we go down to the *Jolly Waggoner*, where Daniel Coffin and his party are."

"Well, go up-stairs and put on your toggery," interrupted the Buttoner, really beginning to think that it was high time to make themselves scarce.

"Nell Gibson accordingly tripped up to the room above: but scarcely had she adjusted her bonnet and thrown her flaunting scarf over her previously much exposed shoulders and bosom, when she heard the sounds of voices below—and recognising Bencull's hoarse tones, she hastened down-stairs again, sick at heart with the apprehension that Sir Douglas had been retaken.

Bencull, Bob the Durrynacker, and the Mushroom Faker had indeed returned, as Nell had just expected: but instead of being accompanied by the Baronet, the first mentioned of the three ruffians bore in his arms the inanimate form of a beautiful girl, while one of the others carried in his hand a bundle tied up in a shawl.

"What in the devil's name does this mean?" demanded the Buttoner, surveying his comrades with surprise and the senseless damsel with a look of admiration.

"Here's a present for Nell," said Bencull, with a salacious leer as he looked down upon the still and placid countenance of his fair burthen. "Nell will break her in, in the usual style—"

"Aye, that will I!" exclaimed the young woman, who was not only immensely relieved at finding her fears unfounded with regard to the recapture of the Baronet, but who was also much struck with the sweet, touching, and interesting beauty of the fair stranger whose charms she already resolved upon turning into gold. "Mrs. Gale will give twenty gumeas for this young creature: and I daresay the Marquis of Leveson, who is Mrs. Gale's best patron, will give her at least five times as much. But come—bring her upstairs and lay her down on the bed: for this swoon is so deep that it may be dangerous."

Bencull accordingly bore the beauteous girl in his arms to the chamber above; while Nell Gibson followed with the bundle which she took from the Mushroom Faker who was carrying it. The fair stranger was deposited softly and gently upon the heap of flock; and Nell Gibson, stooping down, unfastened her bonnet, which was much crushed, so as to give her air. A luxuriant profusion of soft and fine flaxen tresses now flowed over the wretched coverlid, whereon reclined the damsel's beauteous head: and though all tint of vital colouring had fled from her countenance, leaving it marble pale, and her eyes were closed as if in death: so still were the long brown lashes that rested on her cheeks, yet was there an air of such Madonnalike sweetness and angelic beauty about this lovely girl, that only a heart so intensely selfish as that of Nell Gibson, or so brutally ferocious as that of Bencull, could have remained inaccessible to the soft stealing influence and silent magic of such charms.

The damsel was tall, slender, and of sylphid symmetry. Her apparel, though exceedingly plain, was very neat; and as she lay stretched upon that sordid couch,

her drapery, humble as it was, seemed to have settled itself in purely classic folds, developing the flowing outlines of the form which it concealed and displaying the exquisite shape of the beautifully modelled limbs.

It was not however in such an æsthetic light that Nell Gibson contemplated the sweetly reposing form of the inanimate maiden; but she did not fail to appreciate all the touching softness and all the tender interest that enveloped the fair stranger as with a halo; so that when she had removed the bonnet and beheld all that silken richness of the flaxen hair, setting off a countenance of virginal innocence—shoulders beautifully rounded and gently sloping—and bust whose nascent charms were proportioned like a Grecian statue,—the young woman threw upon Bencull a look of delight, as she whispered "This is indeed a prize that you have brought here!"

"Well, you may thank the night-coach for upsetting just at the brow of Shooter's Hill," returned Bencull.

"What on earth do you mean?" demanded Nell Gibson, surveying him with a look of astonishment at such a singular remark.

"I mean just this," answered the man: "that as me and the two pals reached the hill in search of that feller Huntingdon, we heard a noise of voices calling out, horses plunging and all kind of confusion while light was dancing about on the spot that the noise came from. So we crept up to the place; and we soon found out what it was. The night-coach for Dover had upset: and there was a rare scene, if so be all that took place in the dark can be called a scene at all. But it wasn't quiet in the dark neither; for the coachman and guard had got down the lamps and was moving about to see the extent of the mischief done. *'Here this sweet young gal,'* says the guard, *which sat next to me just now: she's pitched right on this bank, and is either stunned or dead.*—and as he spoke he threw the light on her face and figure in such a manner that me and the two pals caught a full view of her, for she was lying within a couple of yards of the spot where we was hid in the shade. We saw quite enough of her to convince us that she was a sweet pretty creature; and the Mushroom Faker whispered in my ear *'My eyes! if Nell Gibson only had that young gal in her hands for a week or so.'* These words was a hint; and without any more ado I took the young gal up in my arms the moment the guard turned

away to attend to a inside passenger. Finding that her heart beat, I carried her right clean away from the spot, no one seeing the dodge in the darkness and the confusion. The Mushroom Faker kicked against a bundle which he accordingly picked up and brought with him; and as it was quite close to the place where the young girl was lying, I suppose it is her's."

"Well, the occurrence is a fortunate one," observed Nell Gibson: "for Mrs. Gale will pay handsomely for this young creature. She's delicate looking but beautiful as an angel, though I say it who know so little about angels—and perhaps never shall know any more. But what about the Baronet?" she demanded abruptly.

"Oh! he's a Baronet, is he?" exclaimed Bencull. "Yes—to be sure, I recollect there is a Baronet of the name of Huntingdon at the West End—I've heard of him afore: he's a pale of the Prince's. Well, I suppose he has got clean off: and precious awkward it is, too. I must go down stairs and see what our pals say about it. So I'll leave you to take care of this young gal."

With these words the ruffian quitted the chamber: and when the door had closed behind him, Nell Gibson took some water and sprinkled it upon the young damsel's countenance. The effect was soon visible—and slowly did the fair being begin to recover: her bosom rose and fell with the long and painful undulations of returning consciousness;—and opening a pair of the finest azure eyes that ever reflected the pure soul's light of innocence, she gazed up with a look of vacant inquiry into the countenance that was bending over her. Then, as her recollection gradually revived: and all the circumstances of the recent accident were recalled to her mind, she glanced around with an expression rather of gratitude than astonishment: for it naturally occurred to her that she was experiencing the hospitality of some humble dwelling near the scene of the coach accident.

"Are you injured?—do you feel hurt?" inquired Nell Gibson, in a tone so kind and reassuring that it precluded the springing up of any immediate alarm or suspicion in the maiden's mind.

"No—I do not feel that I have sustained serious injury, beyond a severe shock, answered the beautiful stranger, in a voice of the most touching melody: and as the colour came back with the delicate tinge of the roseleaf to her cheeks, but with the deepest hue of that blushing

flower to her exquisitely chiselled lips,—and as these lips revealed teeth white as oriental pearls, and exhaled the balmy breath—Nell Gibson could not help thinking that she had never seen a lovelier creature than this fair girl.

"You are welcome where you are, young lady," said Nell: "and if you can put up with such poor accommodation as I am able to afford, I shall be truly happy."

"My best thanks are due for your kindness," answered the damsel: and it was with a sort of ill-subdued shudder that she cast her eyes around that wretched, cheerless, poverty-stricken chamber. But I must pursue my journey this night—I must return to the coach, which will no doubt continue its way——"

"The coach is so much injured," interrupted Nell, "that it will not be able to go on till the morning: and therefore you must make up your mind to stay here. Is that your bundle, Miss?"

"Yes—I thank you," was the answer, as the fair stranger glanced towards the object thus indicated. "But indeed—oh! indeed," she cried, in accents that bespoke a painful and increasing agitation "I must even pursue my way on foot—for I have promised to be at Dover by a certain hour to-morrow:"—and as she thus spoke, she endeavoured to rise from the flock bed: but sinking back again with the weakness and exhaustion consequent upon her fall from the coach-top, she clasped her hands in a despairing manner—murmuring, "O God! what will he think?"

Then a faintness came over her—and she sank down again upon the wretched couch, deprived of consciousness.

* * * *

Meantime, in the apartment down stairs, Bob the Durrynaker and the Mushroom Faker explained to the Buttoner the accident relative to the night-coach, and the manner in which the fair damsel had fallen into their hands.

"Well, I've no doubt but what my young woman will turn her to precious good advantage," said the Buttoner. "But wouldn't it have been much better to go on looking after the swell cove, than to bother one's-self about young gals pitched from the top of stage-coaches?"

"This Huntingdon chap, you see, has slipped betwixt our fingers," said the Mushroom Faker; and to think of looking any longer for him in the midst of this dark night was about as wise as to hunt for a needle in a haystack."

"Then we must all bolt off at once,"

said the Buttoner: "or else the swell cove will p'r'aps come back with a posse of beaks at his heels."

"Now, then—who's giving way to idle fears like that there?—and where the deuce is the swell cove to get assistance or raise an alarm at this time of night?" demanded Bencull, who had just descended from the chamber above. "The circumstances of his knowing our precious names and having seen all our beautiful faces is the worst: cos why, it will make London too hot to hold us. Now then, I tell you what we will do," he continued, speaking with great rapidity. There's no doubt, this Baronet——"

"Baronet!" ejaculated the Buttoner "How d'ye know he's a Baronet?"

"Why, your young woman says so," answered Bencull.

"Ah! Nell said so, did she?" observed the Buttoner, all his suspicions flaming up again, more vividly than ever, in his mind, but not deeming the present time a favourable opportunity to mention his misgivings, he said, "Well, go on, Bencull: what are we to do?—what do you advise?"

"Why, I should think," continued the landlord of the dark crib at Jacob's Island, "that the Baronet must have got down into the main road by this time: so that he is making for Dartford or else for Greenwich. Whichever it is, he *must* be overtook and done for, come what will. Now then, you and me. Buttoner, will cut right through the thicket and take the Dartford direction—while you two," he added, addressing himself to the Durrynaker and the Mushroom Faker, "set off towards Greenwich. This is what we ought to have done at first: but it's better late than never—and we're pretty sure to overtake him.

"I'll just run up and let Nell know what we are doing," said the Buttoner.

"Don't stay a moment then," observed Bencull.

The Buttoner hastened up-stairs and found Nell Gibson hanging over the fair stranger, just at the moment that the latter had sunk down again into a state of insensibility, as already described.

"I'm going off in pursuit of that swell cove, Nell," said the Buttoner, in a hurried manner and without suffering her to perceive that his suspicions were aroused again: "for Bencull says it must be done, and so we mean to dog him until we find him. You must stay here till we come back."

Nell Gibson dared not venture a word of remonstrance against this renewal of the

The Buttoner, having made her acquainted with the intended expedition, paused not to speak another word, but hastened down to rejoin his companions. They then all four issued from the hut leaving Nell Gibson alone with the fair stranger.

FRESH PERILS.

"And they had become engaged in the chase of the overturned coach, as already mentioned, the object of their search was across the fields towards a light tower in the distance.

"No—that there isn't," returned the

landlord, still keeping fast in the doorway. But where do you come from?—and how is it you are out so late? You seem a stylish kind of gentleman, notwithstanding."

"The truth is," answered Sir Douglas, "I am a man of rank and fortune. My carriage has been robbed by a set of ruffians on Shooter's Hill: and I was dragged away to a hut close by. There I should have been murdered, were it not for secret intimation given me by a young woman, of her companions' diabolical intentions. Thanks to her, my life is saved. I escaped—and wandering through the darkness, caught a glimpse of the light shining from your window: Now, then, will you refuse me admission?—for depend upon it, the accommodation which I seek will be liberally recompensed. If you wish to know who I am, my name is Sir Douglas Huntingdon."

We must pause for an instant to acquaint our readers that every syllable of this explanation was overheard by the Hangman, Sally Melmoth, and Jack the Foundling, who had established their quarters at the *Jolly Waggoner* for the night. They had not as yet retired to rest but had been carousing with the landlord until the moment the Baronet knocked at the front door. As he gave the above account of his adventures, the Hangman and his companions at once comprehended that it must have been Barcull's party who had waylaid the carriage: and they likewise understood that it was to the Mushroom Faker's hut the Baronet had been dragged. But no words can depict their astonishment, when they further gleaned from his explanations that it could have been none other than Nell Gibson who had given him the private information which induced him to escape. The Hangman and Sally Melmoth accordingly exchanged looks of ominous significance, as they both muttered the name of Nell Gibson; and Jack the Foundling seemed equally amazed and indignant at the evident treachery of that young woman.

Now the landlord of the *Jolly Waggoner* was neither more nor less than one of the members of Daniel Coffin's extensive brotherhood of desperadoes; and therefore as the Baronet revealed the details of his adventures, the fellow at once understood how he ought to act. But if he experienced any indecision on the point, it speedily vanished as the Hangman's voice reached his ears, in a gruff whisper from the fireplace where he was seated,—saying, "Let him in by all means."

The landlord coughed aloud in order to prevent that whisper reaching the Baronet and assuming an air of profound civility, he said, "Pray walk in, sir, I am sorry that a gentleman of your rank and consideration should have been so scurvily treated in this here neighbourhood."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon accordingly entered the place and as there was no passage of any kind, he at once found himself in what may be called the parlour or tap-room of that little alehouse. There were numerous Windsor chairs ranged round the walls—a huge deal table in the middle of the room—several spittoons upon the sanded floor—and a cheerful fire blazing in the grate. On the table were jugs of ale, a tray of pipes, and a paper of tobacco; and seated round the hearth were the Hangman, Sally Melmoth, and Jack the Foundling.

Daniel Coffin was the first to make way for the Baronet; and so very polite and civil was he, that Sir Douglas failed to receive any evil impression from his particular sinister countenance. The landlord, remarking "that it was very cold, and that his guest would no doubt like something warm," hastened into a little bar parlour opening from the end of the room, and speedily returned with a reeking tumbler of brandy-and-water.

"And so sir, you was unfortunate enough to get robbed, was you?" said the landlord, as he resumed his own seat in the chimney corner. "Only think," he continued, addressing himself to the Hangman "of the gentleman being compelled to fly for his life. But what a good young woman it must have been that gave him such a hint,"

"Yes," observed Daniel Coffin; "I heard the gentlemen telling you the story at the door a minute ago; and I thought to myself what a lucky thing it was he get off so nice. But I really tremble for the poor young woman, in case she should be suspected by her companions——"

"Ah! you may well say *that*," exclaimed the landlord, taking his cue from the Hangman's words. "The rascals that infest this here neighbourhood, are the most murderous, villanous cut-throats that ever was: and if they only once as much as suspected the young woman——"

"Oh! don't talk of it!" cried Sally Melmoth, pretending to be fearfully shocked; "the bare idea is enough to make one's blood run cold."

"Yes—it would indeed be very shocking," said the landlord shaking his head with awful solemnity, "if the whole

neighbourhood was frightened to-morrow morning by hearing that the poor creature was murdered in that terrible lonely hut."

"Good heavens!" cried Sir Douglas Huntingdon, who had listened with increasing horror and dismay to this colloquy—so that his hair literally stood on end: "is it possible that such a frightful atrocity——"

"Possible indeed!" ejaculated the Hangman: "aye—and very probable too. You see, sir, I am a farmer, living in these parts; and I have heard too much already of the dreadful character of the villains that infest Shooter's Hill."

"Villains indeed. Lord have mercy upon us!" said the landlord, looking as grave and solemn as his semi-intoxicated condition would permit.

"Poor thing, poor thing!" observed Sally Melmoth, clasping her hands in apparent dismay at the picture which her imagination was conjuring up: then fixing her eyes with fearful meaning upon the Baronet, she said, "Ah! sir, it would be a dreadful thing indeed if the poor young woman who has just saved *your* life, should lose her own on that very account!"

"By heavens, you have filled me with excruciating terror!" exclaimed Sir Douglas, starting from his seat. "I did not think the young woman would run such a dreadful risk—or else not for worlds would I have abandoned her in a cowardly manner. But I see that you are right—they are indeed murderous miscreants—and if they should suspect the poor creature——"

"I can't sit here quiet," interrupted the Hangman, also springing from his seat, "while perhaps murder is being done. No—I can't do it," he cried, with an air and tone of blunt honesty. "I'll go, even if I go alone—and prevent bloodshed there."

"No, brave man—you shall not go alone," exclaimed the Baronet, seizing Daniel Coffin's hand and pressing it with an effusion of the warmest admiration and gratitude. "We will go together—we will save that young woman if she be in danger: and at any rate we will take her away from her vile companions. See—I am armed with a knife," he added, unbuttoning his coat, and displaying the weapon which he had brought away with him from the hut.

"And I've fortunately got my barkers with me," said the Hangman, producing a pair of pistols. "But come—let us be off, Jack," he added, turning to the Foundling, "of course you will come with

us. The more we are, the stronger we shall be——"

"Oh! you shall not leave *me* behind," exclaimed Sally Melmoth: "I shall go with you. I long to be able to say a kind word to a woman who, though the companion of murderers, has dared to save a fellow creature's life at the hazard of her own."

"Well, you are a brave woman, wife," said the Hangman, pretending to tap her affectionately on the countenance: "and so you shall come. Now then, let us all be off."

The whole of this colloquy—indeed the entire scene, from the instant Sir Douglas Huntingdon crossed the threshold of the *Jolly Waggoner* until he issued forth again—scarcely occupied ten minutes. The theme of the discourse was full of excitement for the Baronet; and he found himself hurried away by a torrent of terrible misgivings relative to Nell Gibson on the one hand, and a chivalrous anxiety to redeem his character from any imputation of cowardice on the other. His feelings, therefore, being kept in a whirl the whole time, he neither had calmness enough to perceive that there was anything sinister in the looks of his new acquaintances, nor leisure to reflect upon the honesty of their motives. But yielding to the impulse which they had so artfully given to his feelings, he unhesitatingly sallied forth in company with the Hangman, Sally Melmoth, and Jack the Foundling.

They all proceeded across the fields, the Hangman acting as the guide: and it was quite evident that, despite the Egyptian darkness which prevailed, he was well acquainted with the path. But then Sir Douglas Huntingdon remembered that the man had represented himself as a farmer belonging to the district: and it was therefore natural enough that he should be thus familiar with every inch of the locality. They advanced at a pace which was so rapid as to sustain the hurry of the Baronet's thoughts and the excitement of his feelings: and thus he had neither leisure nor scope for those reflections which would perhaps have engendered suspicions in his mind relative to the integrity of his present companions.

"There's the hut!" said the Hangman, as they presently beheld a light glimmering a-head.

"Had we not better approach with considerable caution?" inquired the Baronet.

"Yes—let us creep as quiet as we can up to the place," returned Coffin.

They accordingly advanced stealthily; and as they drew nearer, they observed that lights were burning in the room above as well as in the apartment below. On reaching the hut, they peeped through one of the windows on the ground floor: the candles were flaring with long wicks on the tables—but no one was in the apartment.

"I suppose the ruffians are all out looking for me," said the Baronet, in a low whisper.

"Most likely," responded the Hangman. "Let us enter the cottage."

He accordingly opened the door and passed in followed by the Baronet, Sally Melmoth, and Jack the Foundling.

But scarcely had the party thus entered the hut when the Hangman sprang at Sir Douglas Huntingdon like a tiger darting at its prey, and dashed him on the floor with such violence that he was stunned by the ruffianly outrage. The Hangman then tore open the Baronet's coat; and taking away the knife which Sir Douglas had concealed about his person, the ruffian flung it to a distance. His next proceeding was to draw forth a piece of rope from one of his own capacious pockets, in order to bind the Baronet hand and foot.

"I'll go up-stairs and see who's there," said Sally Melmoth, while her paramour was thus employed. "Perhaps that traitress Nell Gibson is up above, as a light is burning there," she added.

"You had better take care," observed the Hangman. If she suspects that she's found out she may do you a mischief: for she's not a woman to give in easy, I can tell you."

"Ah! then I had better prepare for a battle?" exclaimed Sally: and flinging off her bonnet and a cloak, she seized the knife in one hand and a candle in the other, her whole appearance suddenly denoting the natural ferocity of her disposition when her choler was once excited. "Now if that she-devil, who I always hated and also suspected should attempt any of her nonsense, I'll plunge *this* deep down into her heart:—and he brandished the knife menacingly, her countenance, which was by no means bad looking, being now distorted with the workings of diabolical passions.

"Go with her Jack," said Daniel Coffin, who was still employed in binding the Baronet's limbs. "I must make this fellow fast, so that he may give no trouble when he comes to himself. But I say, Sal, and you too, Jack,—mind—no murder up above there! If you find Nell

Gibson, which I don't suppose you will, as the place is so quiet—but if you *do*, I say make her your prisoner: because we will wait till all the other fellows come back before dealing with either her or this Barouet here."

But before he had even finished speaking, Sally Melmoth had ascended the stairs, closely followed by Jack the Foundling. On reaching the top, they pushed open the great clumsy door: and bursting in, they were struck with amazement on beholding a young creature of about seventeen, and of exquisite beauty, sleeping tranquilly upon the wretched couch spread on the floor.

We should now observe that when the fair stranger had relapsed into a state of unconsciousness, in the manner already described, Nell Gibson had done her best to restore her to life. She soon succeeded: but so weak and exhausted was the lovely damsel in consequence of the fall she had sustained from the coach-top, that she only awoke from a state of insensibility to fall into one of profound slumber. Finding that she thus slept calmly, Nell Gibson had returned to her seat at the table, where she regaled herself with another glass of brandy. The effects of the liquor which she had imbibed so copiously, soon exhibited themselves in a deep drowsiness; and she fell fast asleep in a sort of nook or recess where the table stood. So sound was her slumber that she had not heard the arrival of the Hangman's party—nor even the noise of the outrage upon the Baronet in the room below; but when the door of the upper chamber was burst open by Sally Melmoth and Jack the Foundling, Nell Gibson awoke from her nap.

In the dulness and drowsiness which hung about her after so insufficient an amount of sleep, and with the fumes of liquor still obscuring her brain, she did not immediately observe who the persons were thus entering the chamber. But in a few moments her sight grew clearer—her ideas more collected: and rising from her seat, she beheld Sally Melmoth and Jack the Foundling.

"Ah! what—are you here?" she exclaimed, addressing herself familiarly to the Hangman's mistress: but instantaneously perceiving that this woman carried a knife in her hand, and that her countenance was positively hideous with the distortions and workings of dire passion, Nell Gibson saw that something was wrong: with admirable presence of mind, however, she said, "What is the matter?"

"Who is that girl?" demanded Sally glancing down towards the fair stranger.

"What do you mean by coming up here to me with that knife in your hand, and with these ferocious looks?" asked Nell Gibson, her own spirit rising and her eyes flashing fire upon the Hangman's mistress.

But before any further words were exchanged between the two women, the Hangman himself, having finished binding the Baronet's limbs, made his appearance in the chamber, and was as much struck as Sally Melmoth and the Foundling had been on observing the sweet girl, who, started by the sound of angry voices, was now opening her eyes in alarm.

"Here is the traitress!" exclaimed Sally Melmoth, pointing savagely with the knife towards Nell Gibson.

"Traitor! whom do you dare call a traitress?" cried the young woman fortified—or rather rendered desperate by the brandy she had imbibed so plentifully.

"Ah! we have got your Baronet, Miss Nelly—we have brought him back with us, I can tell you!" exclaimed the Hangman's mistress in a jeering and taunting tone.

A livid paleness overspread Nell Gibson's countenance as she saw that her proceeding of that night with regard to Sir Douglas Huntingdon, was thus positively known: and bold though she naturally was—armed too as she now likewise was with an artificial stimulant—she nevertheless felt her heart sink down completely within her, for she knew full well that *her's* was a treachery which her companions in crime seldom forgave, and the punishment of which was *death*!

"Ah! you see that she is guilty—her looks betray her!" yelled forth the infuriate Sally Melmoth: and raising her knife, she sprang like a tiger-cat towards Nell Gibson, who, cruelly alarmed, fled screaming horribly into the nook where the table stood.

"Do not murder her, Sal!" cried the Hangman, in a voice of thunder, as he seized upon his enraged mistress and threw his arms round her to hold her back, while Jack the Foundling proceeded to wrest the knife from her grasp.

But here we must observe that although only just awakened from a profound slumber, the fair stranger was nevertheless startled into the fullest consciousness by the fearful scene that thus suddenly burst upon her vision. Instantaneously comprehending that instead of being beneath some hospitable roof, she was in a den of murderous miscreants, the affrighted girl sprang up from the bed and rushed to the

door. Terror—the keenest, acutest, most poignant terror—gave her wings that made her movements rapid as the lightning flash: and all her senses being suddenly endowed with the most vivid clearness, in this moment of life or death, it was no wonder if she observed that on the outer side of the chamber-door there was a large bolt. With admirable presence of mind she dashed to the door, and with her taper fingers shot the bolt into its socket: then precipitating herself down the stairs, now knowing what obstacles she might have to encounter, she alighted in the chamber below.

At first it struck her as being empty; but an ejaculation of mingled surprise and entreaty reached her ears—and then her eyes fell upon the Baronet who had just returned to consciousness. Without wasting a single moment in words, the courageous girl proceeded to action: and observing that a cupboard stood open, she threw a rapid glance upon its shelves. A knife was what she sought for—and a knife did she find accordingly. In another instant she was upon her knees, cutting the cords which bound the Baronet's limbs.

It was a moment of awful suspense and excruciating alarm for both. The Hangman was thundering at the door above, evidently dashing himself with all the weight of his form against it,—while the process of cutting the cords was calculated to occupy nearly a minute. A minute!—Ah! it is nothing in the ordinary events of life: but it is an age—when life itself is trembling in the balance or hanging to a thread!

But now the last piece of cord is cut—the bonds fall off the Baronet's limbs—and starting to his feet he grasps the hand of his fair deliverer with an effusion of gratitude that is in itself a love—a worship—a devotion.

"Away, dear girl—away!" he cried, retaining that fair hand in his own that he might guide her from the hut.

At the same instant the door to the chamber was burst open: but with such fury did the Hangman precipitate himself down the stairs, that missing the steps he fell heavily from top to bottom. To this circumstance, perhaps, did the Baronet and his fair companion owe their safety: for as they darted forth from the hut, plunging into the utter darkness of the night, they had the advantage of the few moments which were lost by Daniel Coffin in picking himself up and trying his limbs to feel, if any were broken. Then forth he sped

in pursuit of the fugitives,—Sally Melmoth and Jack the Founding remaining behind him to keep guard over Nell Gibson.

Sir Douglas proceeded at random as he guided his fair companion, thinking less of taking any special direction than of placing as great a distance as possible between themselves and the hut. Speedily emerging from the thicket, he paused for an instant to listen whether there were any sounds of pursuit; but he could hear nothing save the heart-beatings of that young girl who now clung with apparent exhaustion to his arm.

"We are not pursued," he said in a hurried whisper: "do you think you can walk a little way farther—only a little way?—and then perhaps we shall reach some place of safety."

"Yes—O yes!" she murmured, in a tone that nevertheless was fraught with the accents of desperation. "I feel that I am sinking—and yet I must proceed—our lives depend upon it!"

"Oh! for God's sake make an effort—make an effort:" whispered the Baronet, in a tone of intense earnestness: and scarcely caring for himself at the moment, he felt as much—yes, as profoundly—for this sweet girl as if she were a beloved sister or one whom he had long loved and who was to become his wife.

They advanced again, his arm thrown round her slender waist to support her; and in this manner they proceeded for about ten minutes. Their eyes, growing accustomed to the deep darkness, enabled them to distinguish the obscure outline of the path which they were pursuing; and to the joy of the Baronet, he found that they were rapidly nearing the main road. But his fair companion now grew so faint that she clung to him like a dead weight: and he had to carry rather than support her. That sudden flaming up of her courage, her spirit, and her presence of mind in the hut, had led to a reaction which was gradually prostrating her completely; and by the time they emerged from the fields into the high road, the Baronet was made painfully aware that she was fainting in his arms.

At this moment the sounds of rapidly approaching wheels were heard, and coming too in the same direction which they were pursuing. In a few moments the lights of a vehicle appeared; and on the Baronet hailing it, to his joy it proved to be a return post-chaise journeying empty to London.

We need hardly say that he took immediate possession of it, carefully placing

his fair companion upon the cushions inside; and on reaching London, she was consigned in a state of alarming exhaustion to the care of the Baronet's housekeeper Mrs. Baines.

CHAPTER LXXXII.

THE INTERESTING INVALID.

After a profound slumber of some hours' duration, the fair stranger awoke to find herself lying on a comfortable couch, in a handsomely furnished chamber, and with a motherly-looking person standing by the bedside. The heavy curtains were drawn over the windows, and the room was darkened evidently for the purpose of preventing the invalid's slumber being disturbed by a glare of light: but through an opening in the drapery stole a golden beam of the sun—and thus the damsel knew that it was broad daylight without.

Then, as a crowd of "memories rushed into her brain, a strong shuddering shook her; and it seemed as if some source of ineffable anguish were rending her very heart-strings.

"My poor girl, what ails you?—what do you feel?" asked Mrs. Baines, bending over her and speaking in a tone accompanied with a look of such true maternal kindness that the tears gushed out from the maiden's eyes as if all the founts of her tenderest and deepest feelings were opened. "You have something that troubles you very much, my dear child—something that afflicts you sorely," continued the housekeeper. "I do not ask you to reveal to me your secrets; but remember that you saved the life of my master, Sir Douglas Huntingdon: and therefore, through a feeling of gratitude—if for no other motive—I am anxious and ready to do anything to serve you."

The fair girl gazed up with a look of unspeakable feeling at Mrs. Baines: and then her lips moved as if a revelation were wavering upon them; but whether it were so or not the good woman could not precisely tell. At all events, before the invalid had time to utter a word, the door opened and Dr. Copperas entered the room.

"Ah! here is the doctor," whispered Mrs. Baines to the invalid: then turning towards the physician, she said, "I am glad you have come, sir—for this poor dear girl here seems dreadfully exhausted."

"Well, Mrs. Baines, we shall soon put her to rights," said the physician, seating

himself by the bedside and proceeding to feel the damsel's pulse. "Sir Douglas sent for me three or four hours ago—indeed at nine o'clock this morning, I believe——"

"Yes, sir," observed Mrs. Baines: "and now it is past mid-day."

"True: but I was at a consultation with that very remarkable and extraordinary man Doctor Thurston. Indeed, Miss. Baines, if it were possible to change conditions in this world, and if I had my choice, I think I would sooner be Doctor Thurston than any one I know."

"Well, sir, this is most singular," observed the housekeeper: "for I remember that about six weeks ago, when our coachman broke his leg and you were out of town at the time, Sir Douglas called in Doctor Thurston, and I recollect that the Doctor whispered to me after he had given his opinion on the case, that it was precisely one which *you*, sir, ought to have superintended."

"Did he though? Well, that is very remarkable," cried Doctor Copperas, affecting to be quite amazed: then turning to the fair stranger, he said, "Sir Douglas Huntingdon has just explained to me all the incidents of the preceding night so far as they relate to himself. Had you been long in that hut whence you both escaped so marvellously?—and had you been ill-treated, during your stay there?"

"I had not been there, sir, more than an hour or two," was the answer, "when the incidents occurred which led to our escape: and I certainly received no harsh nor severe treatment:"—then after a short pause, the damsel continued to observe, "I had taken my place on the outside of the night-coach for Dover—it was upset on Shooter's Hill—and I must have been stunned by the fall, for I remember nothing more until I awoke in that hut."

"Excuse the question I am about to ask," said Doctor Copperas. "Had you previously been suffering from privations or sorrows?"

But the damsel suddenly burst into tears; and the physician, although by no means of tender disposition, was touched by this eloquent yet silent response to his query.

"Ah! poor girl—exhaustion—general debility—too great excitement—fearful reaction," muttered the Doctor to himself. "Well, you will be taken care of her and I shall come and see you again in the evening. Now Mrs. Baines, pen, ink, and paper, if you please, and draw the curtain a little."

The housekeeper hastened to obey these instructions, and Doctor Copperas proceeded to write the prescription, observing as he did so, "that he felt convinced he was about to adopt the very same treatment which that eminent and remarkable man Doctor Thurston would have recommended had he been called in."

Having concluded his Esculapian hieroglyphics, he turned towards the bed, saying in a bland tone of inquiry, "And now, what is the name of my interesting patient?"

At the instant that the doctor began the first words of his question, the damsel's cheeks were colourless as alabaster: but scarcely had the final syllables fallen from his lips, when all the blood in her veins seemed to rush to her countenance, suffusing it with the deepest crimson.

"Ah! my dear child," cried Mrs. Baines, "if the Doctor has said anything indiscreet, do not annoy yourself. God knows you can bear no more excitement! I am sure when you were brought home here at three o'clock this morning, in such a state of exhaustion that you could not speak, and your very reason seemed to be abandoning you—But, heavens!" ejaculated the housekeeper, suddenly interrupting herself as a fresh torrent of tears now gushed out from the poor girl's eyes: "what ails you, my dear child—what ails you?"

The damsel could however give no response, even if she wished to do so; her voice was lost in deep and suffocating sobs: but looking up with an expression of ineffable gratitude upon her countenance, she took Mrs. Baines's hand and pressed it to her lips.

"There, there," said Doctor Copperas, "I am afraid I said something indiscreet: but I would not wound the poor girl's feelings for the world. As for the prescription, I have made it out in the name of *Miss Smith*, which by the bye is the name that in similar circumstances is invariably adopted by that ornament of the profession, Doctor Thurston."

Doctor Copperas now took his leave; and when he was gone Mrs. Baines addressed the invalid in the kindest and most endearing manner that she could possibly adopt; for the housekeeper was indeed an excellent-hearted and worthy woman; and though in the service of a master renowned for his dissipated habits and rakish conduct, she herself was of unimpeachable respectability.

"Now, my dear girl," she said, bending over the couch, and whispering with soothing softness of tone in the invalid's

ear, "you have some secret grief which is gnawing at your very heart's core. I do not ask you to tell me what it is: but I *do* ask you to tell me if there is anything that can be done to alleviate it. Should you choose to trust me, you would find that I would go fifty miles to serve you, but not raise a finger to injure you. I saw plain enough that you did not like to mention your name; but I am sure that if there is any harm attached thereto, it is not you yourself who have brought the stain upon it. No—there is innocence in your looks—the candour of purity upon your brow—Ah! and the manner in which you now regard me proves that I am right in believing you to be the dear good girl I hoped and wished the first instant I saw you. But even if you *had* done anything wrong, there is forgiveness to be obtained. Oh! now I see again, by that deprecating look so softly earnest, that it is not so. No—you are all that is good—I am certain you are. Tell me, then, dear child, what can be done for you and recollect that my master owes you so deep a debt of gratitude, there is no trouble he would shun and no expense he would spare to render you a service and lighten your heart of the load of affliction."

"My kindest, best friend," exclaimed the invalid, throwing her arms around the neck of the good housekeeper. "I will tell you everything. Yes—I will tell you all: and then you will comprehend wherefore I am unhappy—why I am tortured with a devouring suspense—and also why I hesitated to mention a name which nevertheless, God knows, has never been disgraced by me. But Oh! before I commence my narrative—let me beg of you—let me implore you to grant me a boon——"

"Speak, dear child!" exclaimed the housekeeper "what is it?"

"Will you procure me a newspaper of to-day?" said the fair stranger in a low soft tone, as if she even hesitated to solicit so trifling a favour.

"In a moment," cried Mrs. Baines: and disappearing from the room for a short time, she returned with a morning journal, saying, "Sir Douglas always takes this newspaper, and therefore it was handy in the house at the moment."

But while she was thus speaking, the invalid, with a sudden access of frenzied excitement, had snatched—or indeed, rather torn the journal from the matron's hand; and sitting up in the bed, as if that feverish excitement had nerved her with sudden strength, she ran her eye over the columns with the breathless suspense and

excruciating uncertainty of one who is about to behold the clearing up of a matter of life or death.

"Thank God!" she exclaimed, "he is safe!"

Then, as if this sudden acquirement of a certainty and abrupt term to a harrowing suspense, were to be followed by a reaction proportionately strong and painful, she fell back in a state of utter prostration alike of mind and body. Mrs. Baines hastened to administer a cordial and apply other restoratives: but hours elapsed, and evening was drawing its veil of obscurity over the hemisphere, before the invalid had so far recovered as to be enabled to converse again. Then with only a few brief words of preface, to the effect that she yearned to unbosom the secrets that lay heavy upon her soul, the poor girl poured forth her revelations to the friendly ear of the matron

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Two hours later—indeed, at about nine o'clock that same evening—Mrs. Baines and Sir Douglas Huntingdon were closeted together in earnest deliberation.

"Ariadne Varian," said the Baronet repeating the words several times. "How prettily the name sounds: it is really most appropriate for such a charming creature. Do you know, Mrs. Baines, that I really feel——But no matter," he exclaimed, suddenly interrupting himself.

"Ah! sir, I know what you were going to say," observed the housekeeper: "and really if you would not think it rude nor unbecoming on my part, I should so earnestly advise you to think of marriage——"

"Well, well," said the Baronet, laughing; "I suppose I must think of it some day or another. But let me read over again this paragraph relative to poor Ariadne's brother; and then you shall tell me at full length and in detail, all those incidents that you have gleaned from her lips and which you have as yet only sketched so briefly to me,"

"Please to read the passage aloud, sir," said Mrs. Baines: "for I only glanced hurriedly over it just now."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon accordingly took up the newspaper and read aloud the ensuing passage:—

"I will be in the recollection of our readers that at the last sessions of the Old Bailey, a respectable-looking and genteel young man, named Theodore Varian, was sentenced to transportation for seven years for 'embezzling monies' and falsifying accounts while in the service of Mr.

Emmerson, the well known stock-broker of Birchin Lane. On the trial, it will be borne in mind, the young man pleaded guilty, and told somewhat pathetic tale relative to having made free with his master's money to pay debts contracted during a beloved sister's illness. Up to this point the sympathy of the whole court had been evidently in his favour; but it will be remembered that he proceeded to accuse Mr. Emmerson of having held out threats and made infamous proposals relative to his sister. As a matter of course, Mr. Emmerson indignantly denied the imputation; and the learned Recorder, to whom Mr. Emmerson's high character, in the City is of course well known, told the prisoner very plainly that all previous sympathy excited in his behalf, was not merely destroyed, but was succeeded by loathing and contempt for this base endeavour to calumniate his employer. Hence the severe sentence of seven years' transportation which his lordship deemed it right to pass upon the prisoner.

"We have recapitulated these facts which were before published in our columns, in order to remind our readers of the artful cunning and unprincipled disposition of this young man, whose external appearance and genteel manners at first enlisted so much sympathy in his favour. And if any farther proof were wanted of the right estimate which the learned Recorder formed of his cunsummate duplicity, such proof will be found in the occurrence we are about to relate. In a word, this Theodore Varian escaped from Newgate last night in a very remarkable manner. It appears that during the day the order had been received for the removal of himself and other convicts to Woolwich, preparatory to their departure for the penal settlement. As the order arrived suddenly, the convicts were permitted to see their friends until a late hour last evening: and it is remembered by the gaol authorities that Theodore Varian was visited by his sister, who was clad in an ample cloak. At nine o'clock the bell rang as a signal for all visitors to depart; and as there were some fifty or sixty strangers, male and female, at the time, it is supposed that Varian must have suddenly slipped on his sister's cloak, and probably a bonnet and veil which it would have been easy for her to conceal under that cloak. At all events, shortly after the strangers had departed, Theodore Varian was missed; and the above explanation is the only solution that can be given as to the mode of escape. Up to the

hour of going to press, we have not heard of his recapture.

"And the conjecture, then, relative to the method of the escape, is the right one," said the Baronet, as he laid down the newspaper. "But you must now give me all the details of Ariadne's narrative."

"With much pleasure, sir," replied Mrs. Baines. "It appears that Theodore and Ariadne are orphans, and that they entertain the sincerest affection for each other—an affection not only natural in consequence of the ties of brother and sister, but also strengthened by the keen appreciation of that orphan lot which they have together endured from childhood. It is true that Theodore self-appropriated some of Mr. Emmerson's money; and I feel confident it is also true that the hard-hearted, griping, greedy citizen *did* tell the unhappy Theodore that if within three days he did not prepare his sister to surrender her honour, the worst should ensue. This was towards the close of September; and for the three following days Ariadne says that her poor brother seemed to be frenzied with grief. It was not until the third night that he revealed to his sister the horrors of his position and the deeper infamy into which Emmerson tried to plunge them both. Ariadne was at first distracted; but in a short time the natural strength of her character enabled her to speak with calmness upon the position in which herself and unhappy brother were involved. To be brief, they saw no alternative but flight;—and having hastily disposed of everything saleable, and thus reduced the amount of their worldly possessions to the compass of two small bundles containing changes of raiment, they fled from the metropolis."

"Poor orphans!" said the Baronet, in a low tone and with an involuntary sigh. "But go on, Mrs. Baines—go on."

"They got a lift in some vehicle as far as Hounslow, where they passed the night. In the next room to the one where Varian slept, two persons of evidently queer character were lodged; and not being aware that the partition was so thin as it was, they conversed unrestrainedly. Theodore could not help hearing every word they said; and he found that they were two highwaymen. They were boasting of their exploits: and from what they said it appeared that there was always a much better chance of an offender against the laws concealing himself in London than in any country districts. In fine, their discourse made such an impression upon Theodore, that he resolved to retrace his

way to the capital. In the morning he communicated to his sister all he had overheard, and the resolution he had formed in consequence; and accordingly, when night came again they returned to London. Hiding themselves in a garret in some low neighbourhood, they passed a fortnight in a state of continual terrors, apprehensions, and alarms. They also lived most frugally—even miserably—in order to eke out their scanty resources. Poor orphans! how often and often must their tears have been mingled as they thought of the present and the past, but dared not look forward to the future! Oh! it makes my heart bleed to think what this dear sweet girl must have suffered. Is it not shocking, sir, that such a heavenly creature—such an angelic being—should be doomed to know such bitter affliction? Only fancy those soft azure eyes weeping such bitter tears—only fancy those lovely pale cheeks, just like damask, being scalded with floods of anguish!—Ah! and fancy too, that those lips which look like rose-buds, should ever wreath otherwise than the sunniest smiles.”

“Mrs. Baines, you are growing quite poetican,” said the Baronet, who was in reality deeply affected. “Come, pray proceed,” he observed hurriedly: “you were telling me how this poor girl and her brother lived for a fortnight in that wretched garret. Psha!” he suddenly cried: “what the deuce is the meaning of this?—and he dashed a tear from his eye.

“Shall I give you a glass of wine, sir?” asked Mrs. Baines, perceiving that he was profoundly touched, and thinking that he required something to console him.

“No—not a drop, I thank you—I never was less in a humour to drink in my life,” he exclaimed. “Pray go on.”

“Well sir, at the end of that fortnight the young man resolved to make an endeavour to find employment under another name. He accordingly went out to seek for such employment; but as several hours passed and he did not return, poor Ariadne could no longer restrain the terrors that were devouring her. She rushed forth wildly to seek for him—to make inquiries after him: and she soon learnt the fatal truth. He had been arrested—taken before the Lord Mayor—and committed to Newgate! O God! I can enter fully and deeply into the anguish which the poor girl must have experienced as these terrible tidings burst upon her! Of course I need not say that from the day of his arrest to that of his escape, she visited him as often and

remained with him as long as the prison regulations would allow. The sessions were being held at the time when he was arrested; and he was tried a few days after. This was a month ago. You have seen, sir, by the newspaper that he pleaded guilty, and that he was condemned to seven years’ transportation. If he had not told the truth about Emmerson’s infamous proposals, he would perhaps only have had two years’ imprisonment: but because he boldly endeavoured to unmask the villain, the Judge threw aside all sympathy.”

“You see, Mrs. Baines, Emmerson is a man of wealth,” observed the baronet,—“a man of high standing in the City—a member of the Common Council, too—and what is more, a staunch Tory. Besides which, he has got a splendid house at Clapham; and no doubt the Recorder frequently dines with him. So you perceive it is easy to account for the Judge’s behaviour on the bench in Theodore Varian’s case. But now for the rest of your narrative.”

“A few more words will conclude it, sir,” said Mrs. Baines. “From the moment of Varian’s condemnation, he and his sister never lost an opportunity of discussing the possibility of his escape. The hope of effecting this alone sustained them. Ariadne tells me that she has lain awake whole nights, pondering upon the chances for and against such a consummation. She says that for hours and hours her thoughts have never wandered away from this one subject. At length the plan was settled;—and yesterday was the day for carrying it into execution. Having half starved herself to eke out her scanty resources, the poor girl had just sufficient to enable her to pay her own coach-fare to Dover, and afford her brother a few shillings to purchase food during his journey thither. The newspaper tells you how the escape was accomplished. No sooner did Ariadne find that the project had succeeded, and that her brother, disguised in the cloak and bonnet, was safe outside the terrible doors of Newgate, than she almost went mad with the delirium of joy. But she was compelled to part immediately from Theodore, for fear of exciting suspicion and affording a trace for pursuers; and while he set off on foot on his journey to Dover, the young maiden took her place outside the night-coach. Of course their ultimate intention was to escape over to France, the captain of one of the boys plying between Dover and Calais being well acquainted with the Varians and well disposed towards them. In conclusion,

sir," added Mrs. Baines, "let me observe that when poor Ariadne entered for a sight of the newspaper, it was to ascertain whether her brother had got safe away or had been re-captured after she parted from him."

"And you have got the exact address where she was to meet her brother at Dover?" said the Baronet inquiringly.

"I wrote it down on this slip of paper from Ariadne's own lips," responded Mrs. Baines: "and here it is."

"Well, I wonder now whether that fellow James is ready to take his departure," cried the Baronet, looking at his watch. "It is nine o'clock."

But at this moment the door opened; and the valet James made his appearance, muffled up as for a journey.

"Now, James," said Sir Douglas Huntingdon, in a serious tone, I can of course rely upon you, as this matter is one not only of delicacy but also most confidentially sacred. You will travel with all possible speed to Dover; and there you will seek this address," continued the Baronet: placing the slip of paper in the servant's hands. "You will ask for *Theodore Varian* and when you mention the name of *Ariadne* as a pass-word you will obtain access to this same Theodore. You will then give him this purse; and urge him to lose no time in escaping to Calais. Tell him that his sister has found kind friends in London—and that moreover measures will be taken to obtain a free pardon for himself. You may add that in the course of a day or two his sister will write to him full particulars, addressed to the Post-Office in Calais."

The Baronet placed a heavy purse in the hands of his faithful servant, who forthwith took his departure in a post-chaise for Dover: and the moment he was gone Mr. Baines returned to Ariadne's chamber. The fair invalid was just awaking from a deep slumber, in which the good house-keeper had left her ere now:—and the assurance that the messenger had departed to meet her brother at Dover, relieved her gentle breast of its chief anxiety. Doctor Copperas presently paid her another visit, and declared that she was going on as favourably as he could expect, adding aside to Mrs. Baines, "that he did not think she could have progressed better since mid-day, even if under the care of that eminent and distinguished man, Doctor Thurston."

CHAPTER LXXXIII.

THE RAKE AND THE RAKE'S VICTIM.

Scarcely had Mrs. Baines quitted the apartment where she had been conversing with the Baronet when a domestic entered to state that a female desired to speak with him upon important business. Not knowing who she might be, and never refusing a female visit, Sir Douglas Huntingdon ordered her to be admitted. A woman, somewhat flauntingly dressed and with a dark veil over her countenance, was shown in: but the instant she crossed the threshold, and even before she raised the veil, the Baronet guessed who she was. Nor was he mistaken: for advancing towards him, she lifted her veil and disclosed the features of Nell Gibson.

"Ah! I am glad you are come—I am delighted to see you are safe and sound," he exclaimed, with the most unaffected sincerity. "But, good heavens! how did you escape from those murderous wretches? I have been tortured with the cruellest alarms concerning you. At one moment I was resolved to give information at Bow Street of all that had occurred: but then I feared that if you had really escaped after all, I should only be compromising you—and *that*, for many reasons, you are well aware I would not do for the world. Besides which I felt assured, that if you escaped the dangers and the violence that were imminent at the moment I left the hut, you would escape altogether."

While the Baronet was giving vent to those rapidly uttered expressions, Nell Gibson seated herself near the fire and gazed upon him with a species of tender interest that seemed strange indeed with one who led such a life and possessed such a heart as she.

"And how knew you," she said, in a gentle and even tremulous voice, "that such dangers menaced me?"

"In the first place because I discovered when it was too late, that I had revealed to a set of miscreants the kindness you had shown towards me," answered the Baronet;—"I mean, that man, that woman, and that youth whom I accompanied back to the hut. Moreover, when I recovered my senses while bound hand and foot in the room below, I overheard the accusation of '*traitress*' levelled against yourself, and then your piercing screams. Ah! Ellen, I can assure you that those screams have rung in my ears ever since!"

"And the young girl whom you brought

away with you?" said Nell Gibson inquiringly.

"Oh! she is safe and will be taken care of," returned the Baronet. "But wherefore was she borne to the hut?"

"Do not ask me," said Nell Gibson "for no good, you may be sure! Ah! you do not appear satisfied with what I say? Well then, it was to make her as bad as I am."

"Enough!" ejaculated Sir Douglas Huntingdon, with a shudder; and then he fixed his eyes upon Nell Gibson, as if to scrutinize thoroughly her entire appearance.

"Ah! you may well look at me," she cried in a tone of bitterness: "I am no doubt changed since first you knew me. That was four years ago. I was then a merry laughing girl of between fifteen and sixteen—yes, and an innocent girl too—"

"Do not think of the past, Ellen," said the Baronet, scarcely able to suppress a sigh as he mentally compared the young woman as she *now* appeared with the young girl as she *was* a few years back. "You last night perilled your life to save mine: tell me, then, what can I do for you?"

"You will give me the hundred guineas for this letter," she said, producing the one which he had written at the hut. "That is all I ask of you—and it will be means of saving my life."

"Can you fear for a moment that I shall hesitate?" exclaimed the Baronet. "I will give you the hundred guineas wherewith to appease those vile men; and I will give you another hundred guineas—aye, or even three or four hundred, for yourself."

"No—not a shilling—not a farthing," said Nell Gibson, firmly and decisively. "Since the day I left you, never, never have I sought succour at your hand: and I would sooner perish—yes, perish miserably—than receive such succour from you!"

"But wherefore, Ellen?" said the Baronet, in amazement. "There is something unnatural—something perverse in this."

"No—it is natural enough, if you do but understand the mind of a woman. Since I left you I have endured many and many privations: I have known what it is to want bread—aye, I have known what it is to feel starvation! Or else do you think, if it had not been through some desperate necessity, I should ever have fallen into the company in which you found me last night? But even when perishing as it

were with famine, I never once applied to *you*."

"But you were wrong, Ellen—you were wrong," said the Baronet. "Whatever had occurred, my purse would always have been open to you."

"Oh! yes—I knew *that*; and it was the thought of your kindness that stung me to the very quick. And therefore, so far from being wrong," she exclaimed, suddenly assuming a proud look that for a moment rendered her really and truly handsome—"so far from being in the wrong," she repeated, "I was in the right: for although fallen so low and become so debased, degraded, and vile, I still had my own little feelings of pride——"

"With what wretched sophistry have you deluded yourself!" interrupted the Baronet. Was I not your seducer?—did I not inflict the most terrible wrong upon you which selfish man can possibly perpetrate towards confiding woman?"

"Aye—if we had always stood in the light of *seducer* and *victim*," said Nell Gibson, "it would have been different. *Then* I should have had a claim upon you, and would not have hesitated to assert it. But if *you* inflicted the first wrong upon *me*, I subsequently inflicted another upon *you*. I proved faithless to you when you loved me so well and cherished me so fondly. I deceived you most grossly—and there was something vile—yes, beyond all expression, vile in my conduct when I robbed and plundered you to expend the proceeds of my iniquity upon a paramour. Well then, instead of remaining your victim I became a wrong doer towards you: and every claim that I might have possessed upon your consideration was forfeited. Yes—I felt all this; and again I tell you that I would sooner have died—aye, have perished miserably—than have received as the pittance of charity, that which once came from a noble bounty! Rather would I have sunk down through famine, than have obtained from your pity that which I once received from your fondest love! Besides, when I left you I was clothed in silk and satin—and no earthly consideration would have induced me to reappear before you in the rags of beggary."

"But still," observed the Baronet, much moved by the language which thus poured with such undoubted sincerity from the young woman's lips—"but still in the depths of your soul remained a certain fondness and affection for me; otherwise you would not have perilled your life to save mine last night."

"Listen to me," exclaimed Nell Gibson,

"and I will unfold to you the maze and mysteries of a woman's heart—not merely of one woman, nor of my heart alone—but the feeling which is peculiar to us all! In the bosom of the vilest, most degraded, and most crime-stained of the unfortunate woman whom the lust of man or the iron sway of poverty has flung upon the streets,—yes in the bosom of even the foulest, lowest, and vilest prostitute, there is one small sanctuary in which an image is treasured up as the idol of a worship: and this is the image of the seducer! In retrospect over years of crime, the unfortunate woman carries her recollections back to the period of her girlhood and her first virgin love. Even though it was the love which robbed her of that virginity and steeped her in disgrace, it is nevertheless the one bright spot in her chequered career. Yes—if we look back through a vista of rags, and filth and poverty, and wretchedness, and crime still do we behold at the beginning that bright and sunny period when hopes were golden and the heart gushed forth with all the freshest feelings of youth. Then is it that the image of the loved one—though perhaps no longer loved—is reproduced vividly to the memory: nor is he thought of as a mere seducer—no, nor is that past spring-tide of joy looked back upon as the very source whence all subsequent pollutions have flowed. Now, then, do you understand me? Since I fled from you I have received the embraces of many many men—I have been glad to sell myself for gold or for silver;—I have given myself up to suitors in moments of sensuality;—at other times, almost without passion and without impulse, I have abandoned myself to strangers through mere profligacy. And yet, though thus drinking the cup of vice to the very dregs, and dragging myself as it were through all kinds of moral filth and pollution, there has still always been one image that I have cherished in the sanctuary of my heart and which no stains of vice nor shades of misery could possibly efface. That image is *yours*: and you are the only living being for whom I would have perilled my life last night, or would peril it again! Nay—had you been any other person, I should have seen you killed without pity and without remorse."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon had listened in speechless amazement to this address, which the young woman delivered with an impressive seriousness that precluded all doubt as to her sincerity. Besides, which, her actions at the hut had fully proven the existence of that sentiment with regard

to her seducer which she now explained; and as with rapid glance the Baronet's mental vision swept over the past, he comprehended full well how such a state of feelings as that which she had described, could be.

Four years had elapsed since he had first encountered Ellen Gibson upon one of his estates in a distant country. Her parents were dead; she had no relatives, but was living with friends. Her education had been tolerably well cared for: indeed, she had been reared in a manner above her means or her expectations. The Baronet saw her and loved her; and she loved him in return. Marriage was not spoken of between a man of rank and wealth and a young girl of rustic parentage: but she became his mistress. He brought her to London—lodged her in a sumptuous mansion—gave her carriages, horses, servants—in fine, all the luxuries and elegancies of life. But she soon formed other connexions; and her profligacy, developing itself with remarkable suddenness, hurried her away with a sort of frenetic speed. Sir Douglas discovered her infidelity, and wrote to remonstrate—even offering her forgiveness: for he was infatuated with her at the time. But instead of answered his note, she sold off the entire contents of the mansion, the carriages, horses, even to his own plate which she had with her at the time: and taking her departure she lavished the produce upon a paramour who had not a single quality, personal, mental, or social, that could compare with those of the Baronet. Since that period her career had been one of those rapid downward ones which furnish so many a history of female crime: and therefore seeing what she now was, and what she once had been, Sir Douglas Huntingdon could scarcely feel astonished if from the dark depths of her present position she occasionally cast wistful, longing, and even loving eyes backward upon that epoch which formed the brightest page in her life's history.

"But wherefore," he said, after a long pause, "should you go back to those dreadful men? Tell me—would you like to abandon the sort of existence you are now leading?"

"God knows I would!" returned the young woman, in a voice expressive of the deepest feeling. "But it is impossible—it is impossible!" she immediately added shaking her head, while an expression of unutterable despair swept over her countenance.

"Why impossible?" demanded the

Baronet, in amazement: "can you not to-morrow if you choose retire into some agreeable seclusion? What if I were to go early in the morning and take a nice respectable lodging for you——"

"Oh! no, no—it is impossible!" interrupted Nell Gibson, impatiently. "You are not aware—you cannot imagine how difficult it is to extricate one's self from the meshes of crime——"

"Do you mean to tell me," said the Baronet, contemplating the young woman in dismay,—“solemnly and seriously tell me, that you are so inveterately wedded to this shocking course of life——”

"My God! no—ten thousand times no!"—interrupted Nell Gibson, a sort of agony sweeping over her features. "Have I not told you that I would abandon this wretched, wretched mode of life if I could? And, oh! words have no power to tell the deep, deep horror—the intense loathing—which I at times feel for such an existence. Ere now I spoke of my depravities, and I said that often when neither tempted by gold or prompted by passion, I flung myself into the embraces of the merest strangers. Well, perhaps if I had described my humour on such occasions as the recklessness of *despair* instead of the wantonness of sheer *depravity*, I should have been nearer the mark. Yes—to drive away thought I must always have some kind of excitement. I hate brandy; but I drink it often and often—I feel that it hardens me. I am always ready to do anything wrong—aye, even to commit unnecessary or unprofitable crimes, sooner than do nothing: and for the same reason do I seek the excitement of all possible profligacies. By these means do I expel *thought*, and thus manage to maintain a calm and even happy exterior.

"But wherefore, I again ask," said the Baronet, "should you not abandon this course of life if you wish? Wherefore return to those horrible companions?"

"Because I am so utterly and completely in their power," answered the young woman. "Wherever I might hide myself, they would seek me out: aye, even did I fly to the ends of the earth, they would pursue me—they would discover my retreat—they would murder me! when once a person gets deep in with such companionship, it is impossible to extricate oneself. No—it cannot be done. You see how completely I am in the power of wretches, by coming here for these hundred guineas to prostitute them."

"Ah! and this reminds me to inquire," said the Baronet, "how you saved your-

self from their fury, and what colouring you gave to the adventure."

"That man who enticed you back to the hut, was none other than the Public Executioner," replied Nell Gibson. "There—start not—speak not—what matters it now who he was? I tell you all this, of course being well aware that you will take no advantage of it. The woman who came with him is his mistress; and the lad his apprentice. Sally Melmoth—that is the woman's name—has long had a spite against me, because she fancies I have been over intimate with her flash man. But no

not for the world! Base and profligate as I know I am, there is a lower depth even than the lowest which I have sunk; and that is the arms of the public hangman. But to return to last night's affair. The Hangman and the apprentice prevented the infuriate woman from doing me a mischief: and while the Hangman himself burst open the door and rushed after you and the young girl, his mistress and the lad kept guard upon me. Presently the Hangman came back, after a fruitless search: and almost at the same time the other men returned from an equally unavailing hunt after you. They were all savage enough; and I thought that everything was over with me. So I prepared for the worst. The Hangman told the other men how you had sought refuge at the public-house in the bye lane—how you had innocently let slip the admission that you owed your life to me—and how he had enticed you back to the hut to be disposed of as the whole gang should think fit. The man that I am now living with—he who brought you down the writing paper and who is called the Buttoner—then declared that from the first moment he suspected I had given you such information, and this suspicion on his part had been confirmed by the circumstance that I had accidentally let out to the stout man whose name is Bencull, that you were a Baronet, this circumstance proving that I knew you before. All these statements and remarks were made in my presence; and ferocious looks glared upon me from every eye. I saw that nothing but the sudden exertion of all my presence of mind could save me; and I accordingly exclaimed, "*Well I confess that all you have said is true; but the man whose life I have this night saved, was my first love—indeed the only man I ever sincerely and truly did love. I know it was vain and useless to beg his life at your hands; and therefore I gave him the whispered information which led him to flee. You*

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may kill me if you like ; but I would do so over again this moment, in spite of all consequences. That is however no reason why I should betray you in other things ; and you know right well that I would not"—They were all much struck by these remarks, but more so by the boldness of my manner. I thereupon proceeded to assure them that you would not take any proceedings against them, for fear of compromising me. As a proof thereof, I offered to come to your house to-day and obtain from you these hundred guineas for them. These assurances satisfied the whole party, the Hangman's mistress alone excepted. Three of the men have now accompanied me as far as your door, and are waiting at this moment in the street. You see, therefore," added Nell Gibson, with that calmness which was her *outward* characteristic, "how true I spoke when I declared that it was impossible to escape from the trammels of crime and the meshes of such companionship."

Thus ended the colloquy between this young woman and her seducer. She received the hundred guineas for which she had called : but again did she emphatically decline any boon or gift for herself. The Baronet accompanied her as far as the front door of his house ; and standing upon the threshold for a few minutes to look after her, he observed by the light of the lamps that she joined three men at the corner of the street.

"Women are strange creatures !" thought the Baronet to himself, as he retraced his way to his own cheerful fireside.

CHAPTER LXXXIV.

MORE PLOTTING AND COUNTER

PLOTTING.

The three men whom Nell Gibson thus joined, were the Buttoner, Bencull, and the Hangman : and passing rapidly away from the fashionable street where Sir Douglas Huntingdon lived, they plunged into a low district in the close vicinity. For be it observed that in London the back windows of the palaces of the rich often look upon the noisome dens where the poor—their *victims*—dwell.

Entering a vile public house, or boozing-ken, the three men and Nell Gibson proceeded to the taproom : and as there was

no one else there at the time, they were enabled to converse at their ease.

"Now, Nell," said the Buttoner, as soon as an order had been given for some liquor "what news ? I suppose you succeeded with your pal, the Baronet."

"Here is the money," she observed, quietly producing gold and Bank notes for a hundred guineas.

"And you couldn't get no more out of him ?" observed Bencull, savagely.

"Not a farthing," answered Nell Gibson. "I had a great deal of difficulty in getting this."

"Then he was deuced ungrateful," said the Hangman, "after all you did for him last night."

"Yes—very," replied the young woman.

"And didn't you learn nothink about that sweet young gal," demanded Bencull.

"Only that Sir Douglas, on ascertaining who she was, restored her to her friends;"—and in giving this answer Nell Gibson was prompted by the same feeling which had inspired her conduct throughout towards the Baronet—namely, to do nothing that should in any way injure or annoy him, but on the contrary anything she could to serve him.

"Well, this is pervoking," exclaimed Bencull—"to lose that young gal after all the trouble I had in getting possession of her ! But there's one more question—and that is, whether there's any chance of a safe crack in the Baronet's house ?"

"Eh ! that's the question," said the Hangman, instinctively tapping his capacious pocket to show that he had his burglarious apparatus concealed about his person.

"I examined the hall well, as I went in and came out," said Nell Gibson ; "but I don't think that an entry can be made in that quarter. In fact, I scarce think from what I saw that it would be worth while to attempt it at all."

"Now mind you, I think just the contrary," cried the Hangman, with an oath : for he had been watching Nell Gibson's countenance from under his overhanging brows, and he felt convinced in his own mind that she was doing all she could to shield the Baronet.

"I say let us try the crack," exclaimed the Buttoner, sharing the Hangman's suspicions.

"And I say," added Bencull, "that if I do it alone, it shall be done. There's a coach-house and stable adjoining the Baronet's mansion : and we can easily get through that way to the back of the premises. Then, when once at the back of a

house, I should like to see the doors or windows that would keep me out."

"Well then, it's agreed," said the Hangman. "Let me see," he continued, looking at a great silver watch which he pulled from his fob; "it's now half past ten o'clock. We will wait here till twelve—and that shall be the hour. The lush is good at this ken, and the landlord knows me."

"Will you stay here, then, Nell?" inquired the Buttoner; "or go home to Bermondsey and get to bed comfortable, while I stay to do the trick?"

"Just as you like?" answered Nell, with apparent indifference: though in her heart she was most anxious to get away at once.

"Well then," said the Buttoner, also affecting the utmost carelessness in the matter, "I should think you had better get home as quick as you can."

"So be it," said Nell Gibson, rising from her seat; then, with a laugh, she observed to her paramour the Buttoner, "Mind in dividin' that swag you remember my regulars:"—and she pointed to the money on the table.

"All right, Nell," said the Buttoner; and the young woman then took her departure.

"What did you let her go for?" demanded the Hangman, savagely, the moment the door closed behind her. "Curse me if I don't think she's been playing us false again with this Baronet——"

"That's just my opinion," interrupted the Buttoner, starting from his seat: "and it's cos why I think so that I persuaded her to be off so that I may have an opportunity of watching her. I shall be back at midnight at all events, if not sooner."

Having thus spoken, he turned up the collar of his coat, slouched his hat over his countenance, then hastened from the boozing-ken. On emerging into the street, he caught a glimpse of Nell Gibson by the light of a lamp, just as she was turning round the corner: and having once got upon the right track, he had no difficulty in keeping her in view,—still leaving such a distance between them as to prevent her from perceiving that she was thus dogged. At first however, she kept halting, turning round, looking and listening, every two or three minutes: but at length, being perfectly satisfied that there was no watch set upon her, she increased her pace, and made straight for the Almonry in Westminster, which was about a mile from the boozing-ken she had so recently left.

The Almonry is one of those dreadful

neighbourhoods where pauperism is most intense, squalor most hideous, demoralization most depraved. It consists chiefly of brothels and such like dens of infamy, and forms part of the domain belonging as an endowment to Westminster Abbey! But inasmuch as loathsome hot-beds of vice and moral lazarus-houses of that kind usually produced a good rent, the Dean and Chapter could not of course think of purging a neighbourhood which yielded them such large revenues.

In the midst of that morass so densely peopled with human reptiles, and exhaling so pestilential an atmosphere, was situated a low boozing-ken known as Meg Blowen's crib. It differed from Bencull's establishment in Jacob's Island, inasmuch as it had not the appearance of a private dwelling, but was open like any other public-house, and had a large room on the ground-floor always filled at night with the vilest of the vile and the lowest of the low.

To this place did Nell Gibson wend her way,—the Buttoner still following at a distance. Entering the establishment, she tarried for a few minutes in the public room to exchange some friendly observations with her acquaintances there: and having thus dispensed her courtesies to the leading members of the gang, she passed into Meg Blowen's—that is to say, the landlady's—private room behind the bar. If we follow her thither and peep in at her proceedings, we shall observe that she requested to be furnished with pen, ink, and paper; and having written a letter, she summoned into her presence a lad whom she believed to be the most trustworthy amongst the juvenile portion of reprobates there assembled. Making him secure about his person the letter which she had written, she bade him hasten and deliver it at an address which she named, and to depart from the house the moment he placed the letter in the hands of the servant answering the door. Having thus explicitly given her instructions, she placed five shillings in the lad's hands: and he set forth with great glee to execute his commission.

But to return to the Buttoner, we must observe that on seeing Nell Gibson enter Meg Blowen's he was more than ever convinced she had some artifice in view: and looking through the window, he first saw converse with her acquaintances in the public room, and then pass into the private parlour behind the bar. He next saw Meg Blowen reach down the pen and ink from a shelf, take a sheet of paper out of a drawer and they carry these writing

materials into the parlour. It would have struck any individual even far less astute than the Buttoner, that Nell Gibson was going to send a written communication somewhere: and he therefore remained intently upon the watch. In a few minutes he saw Nell Gibson appear at the door of the parlour, cast her eyes searchingly around upon the motley assemblage, and select one of the lads. The youth singled out was (as already stated, summoned by her into the parlour: and in a short time he reappeared. But instead of rejoining his companions at the table in the public room, he at once issued forth from the establishment.

The Buttoner followed him until they were at a convenient distance from the place: then looking back and perceiving the coast was clear, he overtook the boy, and clutching him by the collar, said, in a fierce tone, "Now, my lad, a word with you."

"Holloa! Mister Buttoner," exclaimed the youth, catching a glimpse of the man's countenance by the light gleaming from a window. "What do you mean by stopping me like this here?"

"Oh! you know me, do you, young feller?" cried the Buttoner. "Well so much the better: we shall sooner come to an understanding. Now then, you have nothing to fear; because I shall let you keep whatever the young woman has just given you, and I will give you double myself into the bargain."

"Well, she gived me a guinea," said the boy, prompt with a lie and ready with a cheat.

"Wery good," observed the Buttoner. "Then of course you can show it me?"

"Won't you take a gentleman's word?" asked the lad impudently.

"No nonsense," responded the Buttoner, bestowing a hearty shake upon the youth, "Come, show us what Neil Gibson gave yer—and I'll double it."

"Well, by goles! it's turned into a crown," said the boy, producing a five-shilling piece. "It's the reg'lar counterfeited crank she's come over me!"

"Nonsense," interrupted the Buttoner: then pulling a handful of silver from his pocket, and counting out ten shillings, he said, "Now give me the letter you've got about you—walk about for half-an-hour or so—and go back and tell the young woman that you've done her commission quite faithful."

The ten shillings chinked in the boy's hand—the Buttoner grasped the letter—and they separated,—the latter returning

to the boozing-ken where he had left the Hangman and Bencull. In a few hasty words he explained to them all that had occurred: and on opening the letter, which was addressed to Sir Douglas Huntingdon the contents were found to be as follow:—

"Look well to your premises to-night. A burglary is contemplated by some of the men you saw at the hut on Shooter's Hill, I said all I could to prevent this further annoyance towards you; but I could not succeed in staving it off. I am very much afraid that they suspected I was playing a part; if so, all these causes of suspicion will make it go hard with me sooner or later. But no matter: whatever is to happen must take its course. I would have come back to warn you of the attempt that will be made; but I am so fearful that one of the men might go and watch the street. So I prefer writing, and have found a trusty messenger. I think the men will enter by the coach-house and get round to the back of the premises: but you must keep watch at all points. One thing however I conjure you—that is not to adopt any means to take them into custody, nor yet to do them any unnecessary hurt: only just to defend and protect yourself. This is most likely the last time you will ever hear of or from.

"ELLEN."

The rage of the Hangman, Bencull, and the Buttoner, on reading this epistle, may be better conceived than described. Daniel Coffin muttered such awful threats against the young woman, that if his two companions had not been kindred fiends, their blood would have run cold. But when the first ebullition of their diabolical wrath was expended, they agreed after calmer and cooler deliberation, to conceal for the present their knowledge of this additional treachery on Nell Gibson's part, with a view to ascertain by some means or other whether she were also betraying them in respect to the plot initiated against Larry Sampson.

By the time this resolution was fairly discussed and adopted by the three villains, the Hangman's watch showed that it was midnight. They accordingly tossed off bumpers of brandy to drink success to their undertaking; and thus inspired with a more than natural amount of brute courage, they repaired in the direction of Sir Douglas Huntingdon's mansion.

Although the street where the house was situated was a fashionable one, it was no great thoroughfare; and by the aid of the Hangman's skeleton keys the coach-

house door was soon opened. The three ruffians, having thus let themselves into this portion of the establishment, locked the door behind them, and then proceeded to light a "darkey," or lantern, which also formed part of the invariable tackle of a cracksman. In the rear of the coach-house were the stables, in which there were several horses; and there was a door behind, leading into a yard at the back of the house. The three burglars accordingly entered the stable for the purpose of passing through by the way described: but two of the horses exhibited such manifestations of terror by kicking and plunging, as if instinctively aware of the presence of intruders, that a groom who slept in a chamber above the coach-house was aroused from his repose.

Leaping from his bed, and arming himself with a pair of pistols, the groom sprang down the ladder leading to his chamber: but he was instantaneously seized by the three burglars, against whom he made a desperate resistance. The lantern was dashed out of the Hangman's hand, and the glass broken against the wall: it then fell upon a heap of straw, the light remaining unextinguished. The same blow which dashed the lantern from Coffin's hand knocked him violently down; and he lay half-stunned upon the floor for nearly a minute, during which Bencull and the Buttoner succeeded in overpowering the groom.

"Let's give him his gruel, Ben," cried the Buttoner, as they both dashed the unfortunate man with all their strength against the wall; so that he groaned heavily once and then fell—lying motionless, either dead or else stunned beyond all hope of recovery.

But scarcely was this crime accomplished, when the sudden blazing of the straw on which the lantern had fallen, startled the burglars. From the Buttoner's lips burst the cry of "Fire!"—the Hangman who had just recovered his senses, sprang as if galvanized to his feet;—and Bencull at once began to throw pails of water upon the burning material, there being a pump in the coach-house. But this endeavour to extinguish the flame speedily proving utterly ineffectual, the three burglars were compelled to depart as stealthily and promptly as they could.

Sir Douglas Huntingdon has not as yet retired to rest. The story which he had heard from the lips of his housekeeper relative to the troubles of Theodore and Ariadne Varian—together with the singular and touching features of his inter-

view with Nell Gibson,—had furnished him with so much food for reflection that he remained sitting by his cheerful fireside, lost in serious meditation. All the rest of the household had retired to their chambers: a profound stillness reigned through the house; and not a sound reached his ears from without. But all on a sudden this dead, deep silence—this awe-inspiring solemnity of the mid-night hour—was broken by that most terrible of all alarms, the cry of "Fire!"

Startled from his reflections as if by the voice of doom thundering in his ear, and springing from his seat as if stung by an adder, Sir Douglas Huntingdon rushed from the room and bounded forth to the front door to ascertain whether the alarm were real and where the fire was. In an instant he acquired the dreadful certainty that it was neither a cruel jest nor a false rumour; for the moment he opened the front door, the vivid light flashed upon his eyes, and he beheld the flames bursting forth from the windows of the rooms above the coach-house. Already, too, were crowds hurrying thither—the alarm spreading to the neighbouring dwellings—and all the usual features of such a scene were manifesting themselves in their variety, confusion, and excitement.

Several persons sprang towards Sir Douglas—some proffering their advice—others demanding how many people slept in his house, and in which rooms they were. In a moment he was overwhelmed with multitudinous questions and bewildered with conflicting counsels. Then came a couple of watchmen springing their rattles: next appeared three or four hulking fellows bearing along a ladder and knocking down all who got in their way—and all this while the crowd was collecting and the flames were bursting forth with increasing fury.

But Sir Douglas Huntingdon soon recovered his presence of mind: and rushing back into the house he raised the fearful alarm of *fire*, which did not appear as to have reached the ears of any inmate save himself. In a few moments all was bustle, confusion, and dismay within the walls of the mansion. Mrs. Banies came rushing down in her night-clothes; and overcome with terror, she fainted in the hall. Some of the other servants soon made their appearance also; as the flames had now spread from the coach-house to the mansion itself, several active persons amongst the crowd began rapidly to remove all the most portable articles of furniture into the street. The ladder was

raised against the front of the house in case of need, to facilitate escape from the upper storey's: and messengers were despatched for a fire-engine.

Meantime the Baronet, struck with horror at the idea that his groom slept over the coach-house,—and having satisfied himself that the other servants were all safe,—rushed to the back of the premises and opened the door leading from the yard to the stable. Several persons followed him: but the instant that stable door was opened, two or three of the horses sprang madly forth, trampling down those who were in their way. Sir Douglas himself was thus much hurt by one of the affrighted animals: but rushing forward, he sought to penetrate into the stable. A volume of flame, bursting forth, drove him back;—and to his horror he heard the piteous sounds of dying agony which proved that several of his horses were perishing in the flames. But the groom—the poor unfortunate groom—where was he? Again did Sir Douglas spring forward in order to penetrate into the coach-house: but again did a volume of smoke drive him back. A third time did he make the attempt;—and now the ceiling of coach-house and stable fell in with a terrific crash;—and if two of the men who had followed the Baronet hither had not suddenly pulled him back as they heard the rafters giving way, he would have been buried in the ruins.

For a few moments the flames seemed stifled in this part of the premises: but as a long tongue of fire suddenly shot up, lambent and lurid again, the Baronet observed by the light that the fall of the ceiling had brought down with it a considerable portion of the partition-wall separating the stabling department from the mansion itself. A large portion of the interior of the dwelling-house was thus revealed, including a back-staircase leading up to the bed-chambers.

At this moment the recollection flashed to the Baronet's mind that he had not ere now seen Ariadne Varian amongst the other inmates of the mansion whose safety was assured. Indeed, the poor girl had been forgotten: Mrs. Banies had swooned, as already stated, and had been borne to a neighbour's house where she fell into alarming hysterics: and, on the other hand, Sir Douglas Huntingdon's attention had been mainly directed towards the coach-house and stabling. Thus was it that the only two persons who were likely to think of poor Ariadne, were prevented by circumstances from doing so, until the

sudden laying bare of the private staircase to the view of the Baronet, led him to pass in rapid array in his mind every chamber to which that staircase led.

The instant that the image of Ariadne thus flashed to his recollection, he gave utterance to a cry of mingled anguish and despair: then springing forward, he clambered through the vast aperture which the falling in of the partition wall had caused; and he thus gained the interior of the dwelling-house. Passing into the hall, he found his servants and many strangers busy in removing the furniture. He made rapid inquiries concerning Ariadne; but the servants had forgotten her, and the strangers had seen no young damsel answering to her description descend the stairs.

Horrible uncertainty! All the upper part of the house was in a perfect conflagration: the street was as light as if it were daytime;—and one wretched engine was making the most ineffectual attempts to quench the fire. The ladder itself had caught the flames gushing forth from the upper windows. And here we may observe that the crows augmented: and amongst them were the Hangman, Bencull, and the Buttoner, all there hovering about to see what piece of good luck the chapter of accidents might throw in the way.

From all that has been said, hurried and brief though the description be, the reader will understand that the flames had spread like wild-fire in an incredibly short space of time. Catching the chambers above the coach-house they had thence burst into the mansion, all the upper part of which was now enveloped in a terrific blaze. To ascend therefore to the rooms above, appeared an act of frenzy or of desperation. But Ariadne's life was at stake: and this thought was sufficient to nerve the Baronet with the strength and courage of a thousand!

Retracing his way from the hall to the back staircase, he rushed up it. It was the same as a besieger scaling the walls of a town, while all kinds of igneous missiles and combustibles are showered down upon him. Sir Douglas had literally to ascend through gushing flames that scorched and smoke that blinded; but he was resolved to rescue Ariadne, or perish in the attempt! In a few seconds he reached her chamber-door. Bursting it open, he beheld her lying senseless on the carpet. Through the wainscotted wall the flames were already gushing: the heat was intense—the smoke stifling. In less than a minute the maiden would have been suffocated—

whereas she was as yet unscathed by the fire, and had most probably fainted through terror when endeavouring to escape from her room on the first alarm of fire.

To snatch her up in his arms and bear her forth, was the work of a moment. Her head dropped back upon the Baronet's shoulder: and she continued senseless as he rushed with her down the staircase. Rushed indeed!—it was plunging as it were into a fiery furnace: and rapid as the lightning-flash did the thought sweep through the Baronet's mind that it would be a miracle if he and his fair burden reached the street in safety. Vast masses of the partition wall kept falling in; and it seemed as if the whole building were about to give way and bury himself and Ariadne in the smoking, burning ruins. Great pieces of timber—especially rude planks belonging to the lofts above the stables—came crashing down: and thus, in the space of three or four short minutes, did the Baronet and the unconscious Ariadne pass through countless perils of an appalling character. But at length the damsel's brave deliverer reached the foot of the staircase: and as he rushed with his burthen through the hall and appeared with her at the street door, a tremendous shout of applause arose from the assembled multitudes.

At the very instant that Sir Douglas Huntingdon thus reached the threshold of the mansion with the still inanimate Ariadne in his arms, and in the strong glare of the terrific conflagration the maiden was recognised by Bencull. This discovery of the *fair stranger of the hut* was in a moment communicated by the ruffian in a hurried whisper to the Buttoner and the Hangman: and they all three instinctively pressed forward towards the front-door steps. At that very instant Sir Douglas Huntingdon felt a sudden faintness come over him,—doubtless in consequence of the tremendous excitement as well as painful exertions through which he had just passed.

"Who will take care of this young lady?" he cried, as one of his footmen threw an ample cloak over the half-naked form of Ariadne.

But scarcely were the words spoken by the Baronet, when some large portion of the interior of the mansion fell in with such a terrific crash that the crowd retreated in sudden dismay and with cries of alarm: while those who were removing the furniture, rushed out of the house with such haste that the Baronet was thrown violently forward. In that mo-

ment of confusion, Bencull caught Ariadne Varian in his arms: and as if it were written in the book of destiny that circumstances were to favour the ruffian's designs in carrying off the still inanimate maiden, the whole roof of the house fell in at the very instant that he seized upon her. The consequence was that the fire was extinguished, or rather smothered, for the moment as completely as if a deluge of water were poured upon it: and darkness fell upon the scene—a darkness all the more intense through succeeding the glare of the conflagration. Confusion became worse confounded amongst the crowd: and while the whole living mass fell back from the vicinage of the falling house, as the sea sweeps away from the shore upon which it has just dashed its boiling billows, it was no difficult matter for Bencull to hurry away with Ariadne in his arms. The Hangman and the Buttoner kept close at his heels—an empty hackney-coach was encountered at the corner of the street—and the three villains entered it with their lovely burden.

But when the driver asked whither he was to go, the men were thrown into a sudden perplexity. Bencull, however, hastily whispered, "Didn't Nell Gibson talk of a certain Marquis of Leveson who was Mrs. Gale's best customer?"

"To be sure," whispered the Buttoner. "Why not take her direct to him?"

"Ah! do you think of selling her to that Marquis?" said the Hangman. "Well, I know where he lives—I have been in his house:"—then turning to the coachman who stood at the door, and thrusting some silver into his hand, Daniel Coffin ordered him to drive to Albemarle Street.

In a few minutes the vehicle stopped at the door of Leveson House: and it happened that just at the same moment Brockman, the favourite valet of the Marquis, was entering the mansion. Seeing the hackney-coach stop, he inquired of those inside what their business was: and as it was pitch dark within the vehicle, the valet did not observe how villainous were the countenances of the fellows whom he thus addressed.

"The fact is," said the Hangman in a rapid whisper, "we have got a young gal that is intended for his lordship. She's in a fit: and so you can just lift her into the house without fearing any noise—and one of us will call for the recompense the first thing to-morrow morning."

Brockman naturally concluded from this statement that the fellows had been hired

by his master, or else by some one in his lordship's interest, to perform this particular service: and he therefore at once consented to receive the maiden without asking another question. The housekeeper who was sitting up for Brookman, was summoned: and with her aid the valet lifted Ariadne out of the coach and carried her into the mansion.

The vehicle then drove away, the three ruffians congratulating themselves not only on having done something to annoy Sir Douglas Huntingdon, whom they regarded, as a sort of enemy, but likewise on having adopted so bold a step as to convey the damsel direct to the spot where her charms were marketable, instead of conducting the bargain through the medium of a middle-woman, such as Mrs. Gale. But not for a moment did those ruffians experience the slightest remorse for having caused so terrible a conflagration in that house beneath the ruins of which the charred and blackened remains of the unfortunate groom were indubitably buried.

Meantime Sir Douglas Huntingdon, who had been thrown down and stunned by the rush of people from the front door of his mansion, was borne to a neighbour's house, where immediate restoratives were applied. On coming to himself his first inquiry was for Ariadne: but those by whom he was surrounded, could give him no information on the subject. Supposing that she had been taken to some other house in the vicinity, he sallied forth into the street again to make further inquiries on the subject. But neither from his own servants, who were watching over the property removed out of the house—nor from any of the crowd—could he obtain a satisfactory answer. In fact, no tidings could he glean of Ariadne from the moment that he sank down insensible in front of his own door.

Tortured with cruel misgivings, he sped from house to house prosecuting his inquiries, up and down the street—but all in vain. At length he was compelled, through sheer exhaustion, to abandon any farther research for the present, and retire to a neighbouring hotel where he took up his temporary quarters.

CHAPTER LXXXV.

ANOTHER LAMB IN THE LION'S DEN.

On recovering her sense, Ariadne Varian found herself in bed; and sweeping her eyes rapidly around, as a flood of

recollections poured in unto her brain, she at once saw that it was not the same chamber which she had occupied at Sir Douglas Huntingdon's. Handsome as that chamber was, this was far more elegantly furnished, and denoted a more exquisite refinement in taste, or rather in luxury.

A middle aged woman, looking like a housekeeper, was seated by the bedside: and though the instant Ariadne opened her eyes, this female endeavoured to look kindly and speak soothingly, yet it was not with the same motherly tenderness evinced by Mrs. Baines.

No suspicion of treachery, however, entered Ariadne's mind. Collecting her ideas, she remembered that she had been alarmed with cries of "Fire"—that springing from her couch she had beheld the ominous glare at the window of her chamber—and that the noise of the gathering crowds in the streets had reached her ears. She also recollected that, overcome with terror, she had felt her limbs failing and her strength abandoning her; and as she remembered nothing more until the instant she awoke in this strange apartment where she now found herself, she naturally concluded that her reminiscences had been interrupted by a long swoon.

Utterly unaware, therefore, how her life was saved, and who had saved it,—unconscious, indeed of every feature and detail of the terrible conflagration,—her first hurried questions were to inquire where she was, what extent of damage had been done, and whether any lives were lost. Then before even a single one of these queries was answered, she exclaimed with looks and accents of torturing suspense "Tell me, is Sir Douglas Huntingdon safe?"

The question so hurriedly and excitedly put were each and all equally puzzling to the Marquis of Leveson's housekeeper, who was even more ignorant that Ariadne herself relative to what had occurred—seeing that she of course did not know the damsel was, whence she had been brought, or that any particular house had been on fire. Being however of an astute and cunning disposition as the housekeeper of such a nobleman ought to be, the woman gave Ariadne such vague and general, but at the same time reassuring answers, that while she tranquillized the maiden's mind on the one hand, she elicited on the other fresh questions which in themselves were explanations of what had occurred.

"You assure me, then that my kind-

hearted benefactor, Sir Douglas Huntingdon, is safe?" said Ariadne.

"Yes—quite safe."

"Is the house totally consumed? and am I indebted to a neighbour's hospitality for this asylum?"

"I am afraid the damage is great—and you are freely welcome here."

"Was it the Baronet who saved me?" inquired Ariadne, secretly wishing in her heart that the response would be in the affirmative.

"Yes—he rescued you. You were senseless, I suppose?"

"I had fainted through terror the moment I heard the alarm of fire."

"Ah! poor young lady, and enough too to frighten you! I presume you are some relation to Sir Douglas Huntingdon?"

"Not the least," returned Ariadne.

"He is my benefactor—that is to say, he has behaved handsomely, kindly, and nobly towards me, although I have only known him for I may say a few hours—indeed since last night. But this reminds me that his excellent housekeeper, Mrs Baines, has behaved like a mother to me; do you know whether she is quite safe?"

"I have already told you," answered Lord Leveson's housekeeper, "that no lives have been lost."

"Is Mrs. Baines here in this house?"

"No—but at a neighbour's."

"Ah! I understand," said Ariadne: "when so dreadful an occurrence as a fire takes place, in a house, the inmates speedily become dispersed throughout the neighbourhood."

"Yes—that is always the case."

"And now tell me beneath whose roof I have found an asylum!" asked Ariadne.

"Have you ever heard of a nobleman named Leveson—the Marquis of Leveson?" inquired the housekeeper, with becoming caution.

"No, never—Oh! yes—I answered too hastily," said Ariadne, suddenly correcting herself, as she remembered having read that the Mr. Dysart who was hung a short time back was the husband of the Marquis of Leveson's niece. "I have heard his lordship's name mention, now that I think of it—but quite in a casual manner!"

"Well, then, should you be pleased or otherwise," asked the housekeeper, "if you heard that you were beneath the roof of the Marquis of Leveson?"

"I should esteem myself highly honoured," returned Ariadne, with that simplicity of prejudice in favour of the aristocracy which was natural with one who had never been taught either by lessons or by ex-

perience, to loath, hate, and abominate that aristocracy as the greatest curse that God in his wrath or Satan in his malignity ever inflicted upon a country.

"Well, then," said the housekeeper "this is the mansion of the Marquis of Leveson: and I occupy an important post in his lordship's household. His lordship is an excellent man, and I am sure that you will like him amazingly when you come to know him. Besides which, he is certain to feel a great interest in you after your adventure of this night. And then, too, there is his beautiful niece Lady Ernestina Dysart—one of the handsomest and finest women in England. Ah! how unfortunate she has been," added the housekeeper, shaking her head with much apparent solemnity.

"Yes, I know to what you allude," said Ariadne, with a profound sigh, as the thought of Dysart's fate, by a natural association, conjured up ideas of Newgate, and forcibly reminded her of her brother Theodore's recent misfortunes. "It was when reading certain circumstances in the Newspaper that I first became acquainted with the name of the Marquis of Leveson."

"Well, my dear young lady," said the housekeeper, "I need not tell you that it was a sad and shocking blow for his lordship and his lordship's niece. But I see that I must not chatter in this way to you any longer. Pray compose yourself to rest. I will leave a light in your room: and on this table by your bedside you will find cordials, restoratives, and various kinds of refreshment, should you feel exhausted or faint. I will visit you early in the morning and hope to learn that you have slept off the effects of the alarm and nervousness produced by the fire."

The housekeeper then withdrew: and Ariadne speedily sank into a profound slumber, little suspecting into what a maze of perils she had been so perfidiously betrayed.

The first thing in the morning Brockman acquainted the Marquis with the arrival of a young lady in the middle of the night; and as the valet had been conversing with the housekeeper only a few minutes before he repaired to his master's chamber, he had gleaned from her lips all that she herself had gleaned from Ariadne's. The Marquis of Leveson was unfeignedly astonished when he heard of this arrival: and Brockman saw at once that his master had really *not* expected any such occurrence.

But while they were still deliberating

upon the event, and the valet was explaining to the Marquis how the fair stranger had spoken of Sir Douglas Huntingdon and the fire which had occurred at his house, a footman knocked at the door to announce that a man, who declined giving his name, solicited an immediate audience of his lordship. That this was one of the men who had brought the fair stranger to the mansion during the night, was presumable: and the Marquis, anxious to learn more of the matter, at once proceeded to the room where the individual was waiting.

The visitor was none other than the Hangman, dressed out in his very best apparel: but his ill-favoured countenance and sinister look were not much improved by the advantages of a Sunday garb. However, the Marquis did not expect to encounter an elegant gentleman in the individual who had brought the fair stranger to his house: but at the same time he little suspected that the ruffian who now stood in his presence was the Public Executioner—the man who had been admitted into the joint confidence of his niece Ernestina and the Prince Regent relative to the affair of the deceased Paul Dysart!

"Well, and what is your business?" inquired the nobleman.

"I called about the young girl that me and a couple of pals of mine left her last night," said the Hangman, with the most brazen effrontery.

"And pray," demanded the Marquis, assuming a stern look,—“what made you bring that young female hither?”

"You see, my lord," replied Daniel Coffin, "Sir Douglas Huntingdon's house was burnt to the ground during the past night. Me and my pals happened to be mingling quite promiscuous in the crowd that the fire collected; and, lo and behold! the Baronet brought down a young lady in his arms, half naked and in a fainting state. So seeing that she was beautiful as an angel, we got possession of her—whipped her into a coach—and brought her here——"

"But why did you bring her hither?" demanded the Marquis; "that is the point I want you to clear up."

"Oh! there's no gammon about me, my lord," exclaimed Coffin, "The fact is. I've been in those secret chambers of your lordship's, and have looked at all the pretty thing in the shape of statues and paintings——"

"Ah," ejaculated the nobleman, the truth flashing to his comprehension. "Then you are——"

"Dan'el Coffin, at your ladyship's

service" was the reply, "if your lordship wants references," added the fellow, with cool self-sufficiency, "I can give'em either to Lady Ernestina or the Prince Regent."

"Well, I know now who you are and all about to conceal the sensation of utter loathing which he experienced as he gazed upon the public executioner. "In plain terms, then, you fancied that in consequence of having seen my private apartments, you would not be doing wrong in bringing the young girl to me?"

"That's just what it is, my lord," answered the Hangman.

"But do you know who she is?" inquired the Marquis: "what is her station in life—is she the mistress of Sir Douglas Huntingdon—a relative—or a servant? In fact, tell me all about her."

"She's not a servant, but looks like a very genteel young person—almost a lady, I should say. But one thing is very certain—she's *not* the Baronet's mistress for I happen to know that she hasn't even known him many hours."

"But a few minutes are enough to ruin a woman's virtue—let alone a few hours," said the Marquis. "However, that is of little consequence, since, the girl is really beautiful. And now after all you have said, do you mean me to understand that you are not well acquainted with her? Of course you are! What is her name?"

"I can't tell your lordship—I know no more than Adam." was the reply. "The fact is, in a few words, me and my pals were at Shooter's Hill on a little business the night before last; and Sir Douglas Huntingdon, who was travelling that way, fell into our hands. Within the same hour, another accident also threw this young lady in our way: and to be brief, they both succeeded in effecting their escape and getting off together. So it was natural that the Baronet should give the young girl an asylum: and that's the way she came to be at his house. But hasn't your lordship seen her yet!"

"Not yet. I am however told that she is really very beautiful," observed the Marquis.

"Beautiful!" cried the Hangman, with a diabolical leer: "she's so sweetly pretty that if I hadn't thought your lordship would give a good price for her, I should have kept her for myself. I don't know much of these matters: but I must say that you need only look in her face to see that she's innocence itself."

"Well, and so now you are come for your reward said the Marquis. What do you expect?"

"Fifty guineas won't hurt your lordship," answered the Hangman.

"There—take that," said the Marquis throwing down his purse, which he knew contained more than the sum demanded.

Daniel Coffin picked up the purse from the table where the nobleman had tossed it, and then took his departure, well pleased with the success of the visit.

CHAPTER LXXXVI.

A CATASTROPHE.

The chamber to which Ariadne Varian had been consigned at Leveson' House, was the one that communicated with the dressing-room whence a secret-door opened into the private suite of apartments already so often referred to in our narrative. This bed-chamber sometimes occupied by the Marquis himself; but he has frequently slept in a room on a higher story, for the sake of the convenience offered by contiguous baths. Thus, on the particular occasion now referred to, the nobleman had spent the night in this last mentioned chamber: and therefore was it that the housekeeper, with fiendish forethought, consigned Ariadne to the one whence the communication led to the private suite of apartments.

On awaking after some hours of refreshing sleep, Ariadne recalled to mind everything that had occurred during the past night: but still it was without the slightest misgiving or suspicion she remembered that she was now beneath the roof of the Marquis of Leveson.

While she was thus collecting her ideas, the housekeeper entered the room, bearing a tray, containing the young maiden's breakfast.

"It is very late?" inquired Ariadne, fancying that she must have slept a long time.

"It is a little past ten o'clock," replied the housekeeper: "but you will do well to take your breakfast in bed as you have passed through so much excitement and alarm during the past night. Moreover, you have no apparel of any kind here—and I must see about getting some clothes presently. His lordship will come and pay you a visit immediately, and will then confer with you on your plans and prospects."

"What, here!" ejaculated Ariadne, surprised at the remark in conceiving that she had not properly understood it.

"And why not?" asked the housekeeper, with a smile, "The Marquis is old enough to be your father: indeed you are a mere child to him. Moreover, I am going to remain here with you, my love!"

Still Ariadne experienced a secret displeasure at the idea of a stranger visiting her bed-room. Her pure-mindedness and natural delicacy shrank from the thought; but she scarcely dared to venture any farther remonstrance, as she felt that she was under great obligations to those who had given her an asylum beneath that roof. Besides which, as she had no garments to put on—not a stitch nor rag in the whole world beyond the night-drapery that she wore—she could not rise and dress herself to receive the Marquis; and it was natural that he should wish to know whom he had beneath his roof. But this reflection suddenly gave rise to another: namely, what account could she render of herself?—what name should she pass by? To refuse all replies to the questions that might be put, would seem not only suspicious but rude to a degree; and yet, on the other hand, how could she tell the truth?—how announce the name of Ariadne Varian? Ah! the poor girl was indeed unused to the arts of deceit and unskilled in the ways of duplicity.

She was sitting up in bed, pondering mournfully upon these points, and partaking of some chocolate which the housekeeper had poured out for her, when a gentle knock was heard at the door. The housekeeper at once opened it; and the Marquis entered the room. Ariadne instinctively shrank beneath the bed clothes, while her cheeks were suffused with blushes.

"How is the fair guest with whose presence circumstances have thus honoured me?" said the Marquis, assuming his softest voice and blandest manner. "Really the incidents which have thus brought you, young lady, within these walls are so romantic, that they invest you with additional charms."

Ariadne said nothing: she was overwhelmed with confusion. But averting her blushing countenance, she felt such strange sensations come over her—sensations of mingled alarm, outraged modesty, and bitter annoyance—that she was ready to burst into tears.

"You are welcome to my house, young lady," resumed the Marquis,—"most welcome! Indeed the longer you grace it with your presence, the happier I shall feel. My excellent housekeeper here will

see that your slightest wants shall not merely be attended to, but even anticipated——”

“I thank your lordship,” murmured Ariadne, now recovering the power of utterance; but I shall not intrude on your lordship’s hospitality much longer. Indeed if your lordship’s housekeeper will only be kind enough to furnish me with apparel, I shall at once prepare to take my departure,” she added, her sense of violated decency now triumphing over her fears and imparting firmness to her tone.

“Well, well, my dear young lady—you are your own mistress, no doubt,” said the Marquis, believing Ariadne’s conduct to be nothing more nor less than mere affectation: for he could not fancy that it was possible for her to have passed even a few short hours in the dwelling of Sir Douglas Huntingdon and have come forth pure and chaste. “But methinks that this precipitation on your part to leave my mansion, where there is every disposition to treat you kindly——”

“My lord,” interrupted Ariadne, now turning her eyes towards the Marquis while her countenance was flushed with indignation: “I know not what may be the manners and customs of fashionable life; but in the sphere to which I belong, your presence in my chamber would not only be deemed a violation of all the rules of hospitality, but a positive outrage and insult.

“Upon my honour, you take my conduct most unkindly!” exclaimed the Marquis. “But I will withdraw for the present, since you appear to wish it.

He then quitted the room, making a rapid sign to the housekeeper: and the moment the door closed behind him Ariadne burst into a flood of tears.

“My dear girl, don’t take on like this,” said the housekeeper. “Why, I am really surprised at you! His lordship did not mean any offence—how could he? He perhaps spoke in rather an off hand manner: but then that was his familiarity of tone towards one in whom he felt interested. I can assure you that the Marquis is generosity and liberality personified. If you asked him for any boon on which you set your mind, you would have it. And young ladies have their little whims and caprices, you know——”

“Good heavens! what means this strange language?” cried Ariadne, all the suspicions and misgivings which within the last few minutes had been aroused in her mind now becoming excited to a

painful degree. “If you really wish to befriend me——”

“What can I do, young lady? Speak!”

“Procure me some apparel. I cannot offer to recompense you at this moment: but in the course of the day—when once I shall have seen Sir Douglas Huntingdon——”

“Ah!” ejaculated the housekeeper, now perfectly convinced in her own mind that Ariadne was the Baronet’s mistress. “But wherefore should you be in such haste to quit this mansion? Do you desire to return to that Sir Douglas Huntingdon of whom you have spoken?”

“I do—he is my only friend!” exclaimed Ariadne, with passionate vehemence, and not reflecting for a moment what interpretation might be put upon the manner in which she spoke of the Baronet. “But will you—will you, my good woman, procure me some fitting apparel? Surely Lady Ernestina Dysart would take compassion upon me—or one of the female servants might lend me a gown—a shawl—a bonnet—in fine, the barest necessities——”

“To be sure, my dear girl,” said the housekeeper: “I will procure all you want in good time.” Our “At once!” cried Ariadne, springing from the couch. “Procure me some raiment—I will dress myself with all possible haste—and will then intrude no longer——”

“Ah! you are wrong to speak of intrusion,” interrupted the housekeeper. “But come into this dressing-room: here are all the requisites of the toilette—and I will soon procure you fitting apparel.”

“Oh! then I shall thank you indeed!” exclaimed Ariadne, somewhat tranquillised by this assurance.

But while she was combing out her beautiful long flaxen hair in the dressing room adjoining the bed-chamber, the housekeeper took advantage of a moment when the maiden’s back was turned, to touch the secret spring and open the door leading into the suite of private apartments.

“I asked you just now whether you really wished to return to Sir Douglas Huntingdon,” resumed the wily woman; “and you declared that such was your desire.”

“He is my benefactor—I have already told you as much,” said Ariadne. “I am under obligations to him—deep obligations,” she repeated with a profound sigh, as she thought of her brother to whom the Baronet had despatched his valet

James with reassuring messages and with money.

"You are wrong, young lady—you are wrong," continued the housekeeper, "to think of returning to Sir Douglas Huntingdon, when you may be so much happier at the house of the Marquis of Leveson. Behold, my dear girl—behold this splendidly furnished apartment into which the dressing-room opens," she exclaimed, drawing back the secret door. "All these rooms that you see shall be your's—with domestics to wait upon you—if you will only consent to remain here! Ah! my dear young lady, I am sure I shall not supplicate in vain!"

The amazement produced by these words overwhelmed as it were the alarm previously excited and Ariadne, desisting for a moment from the operation of combing out her hair, turned upon the woman a look so full of wonder and startled inquiry, that it even expressed her feelings more eloquently than the words to which she simultaneously gave utterance.

"Wherefore should you invite me thus to remain within these walls?—wherefore should you offer me the inducement of these elegant rooms? Indeed, what know you of me, that such a proposal should have emanated from your lips?"

"Ah! young lady," said the housekeeper adopting a tone of gentle persuasion, "did you not observe that the Marquis surveyed you with admiration! And surely, surely you will not be so cruel as to treat him with indifference or scorn?"

"Good heavens! what words are these that I hear!" exclaimed Ariadne, the colour coming and going in rapid transitions upon her cheeks. "It is impossible that this can be the house of the Marquis of Leveson!—impossible that any nobleman would have intruded into the chamber which his hospitality had afforded to a young and friendless girl!—impossible that any female in his service would dare to address me in the language which has just fallen from your lips!"

"Now, if it comes to the matter of that," exclaimed the housekeeper suddenly throwing off the mask and speaking in a tone of coarse insolence. "I don't see why you should pretend to be so very particular. Come, come young woman—here's enough of this nonsense: and I have already adopted the coaxing tone too long. I suppose you meant to sell yourself to Sir Douglas Huntingdon even if you have not done it already. But let me tell you that the Marquis of Leveson will prove more profitable to you. I saw just now by his

lordship's words that he does not regard you as the stubbornest of prudes or yet as a dragon of virtue: and I know his humour well enough to feel assured that he won't waste much time in coming to the point with you. Indeed he has only retired for a few minutes, just to give me the opportunity of being explicit with you."

A mortal paleness gradually spread itself over Ariadne's countenance, as these words smote upon her ears, carrying as it were the blight of a pestilence down into her very soul: and staggering towards a seat she sank upon it crushed and overwhelmed by a terrible consternation. A faintness seized upon her—a film spread rapidly over her eyes—and she felt that her senses were abandoning her,—when the sudden sound of a door opening and shutting recalled her to herself. Startled back as it were into complete consciousness, she threw her affrighted looks around, and perceived that she was now alone. The housekeeper had left her—and it was the sound of the outer door of the bedchamber that she had heard opening and closing so abruptly. But that door almost immediately opened again: and now it was the Marquis of Leveson who reappeared.

A scream of terror burst from the lips of Ariadne: and not only did alarm, but also a feeling of outraged modesty prompt her to fly from his presence: for he it understood that she was in a state of seminudity, having on nothing but the night-gear which left her neck and bosom all exposed. As she turned thus abruptly away from the approaching Marquis, she beheld the door which the housekeeper had left open when she displayed the handsomely furnished apartment to which it led.

"Beautiful girl!" exclaimed the Marquis catching sight of her naked charms and instantaneously inflamed by the view. "Resistance is vain!—besides, wherefore prove so coy—so cruel——"

But Ariadne had rushed forward into the apartment to which the secret door opened: and as she shut it promptly behind her, she turned round in eager search for the lock, that she might secure herself against the Marquis. But what was her surprise when she beheld nothing but the uniform and unbroken surface of the handsomely papered wall,—no lock—no handle—not even so much as a keyhole, to indicate the presence of a door! The thought flashed to her mind that she had fallen into some new snare: and overcome with a sense of terror now wrought up to an excruciating pitch, she sank down into

one of the splendid arm-chairs with which the apartment was furnished. But at the same instant did another rending scream burst from her lips, as the sharp click of the perfidious mechanism fell upon her ears, and as her arms and shoulders were clasped by the springs that started forth from the chairs!

At the same time the invisible door, by which she had entered that room, was opened—and the Marquis of Leveson made his appearance. Instantaneously shutting the door behind him, he stood feasting his eyes upon the charms of his intended victim. But, Oh! his hard heart melted not with pity as that sweet countenance was upturned with an expression so earnestly imploring, so pathetically entreating towards his own: no pity, nor remorse had he for that damsel's sake—all his ideas, all his aspirations were concentrated in the burning heat of one absorbing passion!

"My lord, my lord," murmured Ariadne "have mercy upon me!"

But as the maiden uttered these words in a dying tone, her head drooped forward—the gaspings of her breath ceased—and the palpitations of her snowy bosom were no longer perceptible.

"She has fainted," said the Marquis to himself. "But she is not the first who—"

The nobleman's reflection was suddenly cut short by a mortal alarm which seized upon him: for as he stooped down and looked at Ariadne, it suddenly struck him that she was dead!

He hastily placed his hand upon her heart: but it beat not: and the bosom which his hand thus pressed in its nudity, was as still as if death were indeed there. With a cold shudder running through his entire form, he touched the secret spring which released her from the grasp of the mechanism and lifting her in his arms he bore her back into the bed-chamber and laid her upon the couch. Still did she continue senseless; and if that were not the sleep of death, then assuredly was it a swoon of a most alarming character.

Vainly did the Marquis sprinkle her countenance with water and apply a scent-bottle to her nostrils. She moved not—her heart was still—her pulse imperceptible—and all vital colouring was disappearing from her lips. Her nails—those beautifully shaped nails, so pellucid with their roseate tint a few moments before now were becoming of a bluish appearance: and this circumstance gave a still deeper shock to the soul of the Marquis, for he

regarded it as the unmistakable sign of death!

He rang the bell—and the housekeeper answered the summons. Nothing could equal the woman's dismay on beholding Ariadne thus stretched lifeless on the couch; and the Marquis saw by the sudden horror which seized upon her what she also thought—his worst fears being then confirmed, that the maiden was indeed dead!

Almost wild with alarm, he bade the housekeeper hasten and fetch Lady Ernestina thither; and in a minute or two the woman returned accompanied by his lordship's niece. But Ernestina at once declared that all human aid was unavailing, and that the damsel was no more!

Nothing could exceed the exorcution of alarm which now reigned in that chamber. What was to be done?—how dispose of the corpse?—how account for the presence of the young female in the house at all? The Marquis paced to and fro in the chamber like a madman: the housekeeper fell upon her knees by the side of the bed, and began giving way to the bitterest lamentations;—while Lady Ernestina, conquering her emotions somewhat in the presence of the awful dilemma stood gazing upon the beautiful face of the dead revolving in her mind a thousand different schemes for the disposal of the corpse.

"Good heavens! what a calamity—what an awful calamity!" exclaimed the Marquis, wringing his hands at one moment, and then gesticulating with them frantically the next.

"Oh! it is enough to hang us all," groaned the housekeeper, "What on earth will become of us?"

"Calm yourselves, calm yourselves—I beseech you!" said Ernestina. "It is only by extreme prudence, circumspection, and caution that we shall avoid discovery—that is to say, if the occurrence *must* be concealed. But why not let it be avowed? The girl was not murdered—at least not murdered in the positive meaning of the term—"

"But there must be a coroner's inquest, and all the annoyance and dangers of an inquiry!" said the Marquis. "How am I to account for the girl being here?—under what circumstances am I to say she died? If recognised and identified as the one who was rescued last night from the fire at Huntingdon's house, how came she here? Wherefore was she brought to such a distance, instead of being taken to some dwelling close at hand? Ah! the

case is fraught with terrible suspicion, Ernestina—you must see that it is!"

"Oh! yes," said the housekeeper, with bitter lamentations; "it must be hushed up—it must be hushed up!"

"Then do you know what is to be done," said Ernestina, a sudden idea striking her. "You must send for Sir Douglas Huntingdon—tell him all that has happened—and throw myself upon his mercy. There is nothing else to be done."

"But if this girl was his mistress," exclaimed the Marquis, "he might seek a cruel revenge. And yet it is hardly possible that he can care anything for her, seeing that their acquaintance has only been of a few hours—Yes, yes," he exclaimed, suddenly interrupting himself: "your advice must be adopted, Ernestina. Huntingdon would not ruin an old friend!"

"Besides," observed the nobleman's niece, "you will ascertain who the young girl was, and whether there will be much inquiry made by relatives or by friends into the circumstances of death."

"Be it then as you," observed the Marquis. "And now, Ernestina, for God's sake take this distracted woman away with you, and endeavour to console her—or at all events to make her hold her peace—while I send for Sir Douglas Huntingdon."

"Lady Ernestina accordingly persuaded the housekeeper to accompany her away from the chamber of death; and the Marquis, quitting the room also, and locking the door behind him, hastened to make a confidant of his valet Brockman, whom he despatched forthwith in search of the Baronet. In about half-an-hour Brockman returned accompanied by Sir Douglas, whom he had found at an hotel in the immediate neighbourhood of his own ruined mansion: and as the valet had not given the Baronet the least intimation of wherefore his presence was required in Albe-marle-street, he was naturally much surprised at being thus peremptorily summoned thither. At first, indeed, he had refused to yield to Brockman's request, fancying that some treacherous or spiteful trick might be meditated against him in revenge for the part he had played in rescuing Louisa Stanley from the power of the Marquis of Leveson. But perceiving, by Brockman's manner, that the affair was urgent, although the valet declined entering into explanatory particulars, Sir Douglas ultimately agreed to accompany him to Leveson House.

On arriving there, the Baronet was at once conducted into an apartment where

he found the Marquis alone, but pacing to and fro in a state of dreadful excitement and agitation.

"Good heavens," Leveson he exclaimed, "what is the matter?"

"Tell me, Huntingdon—tell me, before I speak a word to the point," said the Marquis of Leveson, advancing hurriedly and seizing the Baronet by the hand,— "tell me whether there is any ill feeling on your part towards me!"

"Not a whit!" cried Sir Douglas: "on the contrary, I was fearful that you would break off your friendship with me on account of my intrusion upon your proceedings at so critical a moment the day before yesterday. But my dear Leveson, as you called at Stratton Street and saw Miss Bathurst on that morning, you are of course acquainted with the entire mystery relative——"

"Ah! my dear Huntingdon, all the Miss Bathursts, and Clara Stanleys, and Venetias in the world are at this moment nothing to me," interrupted the Marquis: "for you see before you one of the most miserable of men——"

"Indeed! I do observe that you are pale and agitated—very pale," cried the Baronet. "But what is the matter? Is there anything I can do for you? Though having troubles enough of my own at this moment—what with the burning down of my house—the loss of a young lady in whom I had suddenly conceived the deepest interest——"

"Oh! now, now I am more wretched than ever!" exclaimed the Marquis. "Huntingdon—my honour, almost my life, is in your hands——"

"Good heavens! what mean you?" cried the Baronet, nearly as much stunned as he was bewildered.

"Will you swear to screen me—swear to hold me harmless—swear not to betray me——"

"Yes, yes—I will swear anything, if you only relieve me from this torturing suspense."

"Know, then, that the young lady whom you have lost——"

"Good God; has she fallen into your hands?"

"Yes—but I knew not——"

"Where is she?—where is she?" exclaimed Sir Douglas Huntingdon, seizing the Marquis by the collar of his coat "Oh! if you have dared to harm a hair of her head——"

"Heavens; how shall I tell you the dreadful truth!" almost yelled forth the

wretched Marquis as he writhed in the grasp of the Baronet."

"Villain, you have ravished her!" thundered Sir Douglas, hurling the Marquis from him with terrific violence: then dashing his open palms forcibly against his brow in all the wild fury of excitement, he exclaimed, "Would to God! that you had reported her death to me, rather than this!"

"Her death—her death!" repeated the Marquis, leaning upon the chair against which the Baronet had flung him: "yes—it is her death that I have to report—for she is a spotless virgin so far as I am concerned!"

The Baronet staggered back a few paces, and then reeled as if seized with a sudden vertigo: for despite the confusion into which his ideas were suddenly thrown, still was there a strong lurid beam penetrating them with a horrible clearness, bringing forth in dread relief the fact that the young girl was no more!

"Dead!" he at length muttered between his teeth: "dead, do you say?" repeated in a low thick voice, as with a pale countenance and with wildness in his eyes he gazed upon the Marquis.

"Yes—she is dead," answered Leveson "and if all my fortune could bring her back to life, it should be surrendered up."

"Tell me how this happened," said the Baronet, pressing his hands to his brow as if to steady his reeling brain: then sitting down, he appeared to wait the explanation with the vacancy of look and the abstracted manner of one whose senses are in a whirl.

"I will tell you all—everything," said the Marquis, in a hurried tone of breathless agitation: and then must I throw myself upon your mercy. In the middle of the night some men brought that girl hither—I knew not who she was—I never saw her before—I had not bargained with them for the service which they thus thrust upon me. The men told some tale about you and the young girl having been together at a hut on Shooter's Hill."

"Ah! then I understand who the villains were," exclaimed the Baronet, indignation once more bringing back the colour to his cheeks. "But go on—go on."

"They brought the girl here, then after the fire at your house," resumed the Marquis; "and she was received into the mansion. Believing her, in plain truth, to have been your mistress, I fancied that her coyness was assumed: and perhaps I was too hasty—too importunate. At all events

she sought refuge in that very room which contains the chairs—you know what chairs I mean—and sinking into one, the fright I presume was too much for her—and—and she died!"

"Poor Ariadne:" murmured the Baronet to himself and averting his head, he dashed away a tear.

"On my life" continued the Marquis "I have told you the truth, Huntingdon. I have explained the events precisely as they took place; and I need scarcely say that every possible remedy and restorative was applied to——"

"Enough, enough!" ejaculated Sir Douglas, suddenly. "Let me see her."

This command, uttered with a stern and abrupt imperiousness, was at once obeyed by the Marquis of Leveson: and he conducted the Baronet to the room where Ariadne lay. On the threshold of the chamber, Sir Douglas turned suddenly round and motioned the Marquis not to follow him: then closing the door abruptly, he remained alone in the chamber with the dead.

Advancing slowly, hesitatingly, and with a sensation of awe, to the side of the couch, Sir Douglas Huntingdon beheld all that remained of Ariadne Varian, stretched like a beautiful statue before his eyes. Her light hair, swept entirely away from her brows, fell back over the pillow upon which her head rested—thus revealing the whole of that sweet countenance, with the delicately chiselled and faultless features on which a smile of angelic resignation appeared to rest, as if in the very moment of dissolution she had experienced the certainly that she was about to pass from the woes of earth to the joys of heaven. Her eyelids were shut close, with the brown lashes resting upon the alabaster cheeks; so that she appeared as if she were only sleeping. The lips had remained slightly apart, affording a glimpse of the pearls within, and thus strengthening the impression that she was not dead, but only slept. The slight drapery which she wore, had settled in such a way as to develop the gentle undulations and softly swelling contours of her sylphid form: the arms remained gracefully rounded, like those of one in a slumber, and not with the rigidity of the last sleep from which there is no awakening upon earth;—and the symmetrical beauty of the lower limbs was likewise revealed by the plaits of her virgin vesture. Alas! that this should be the raiment of the dead!

Sir Douglas Huntingdon gazed upon her with a sort of incredulity that she was

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really no more; and for nearly a minute he thought she was only sleeping. He hoped so—and he earnestly prayed within himself that such might be the case. Yet the longer he looked down upon that alabaster countenance, the fainter grew that hope; while the stronger became the conviction that she was indeed no more!

"Yes—her spirit has fled for ever," he inwardly mused: "the young, the innocent, the beautiful has gone to that heaven which is her fitting home. She looks as if she did but sleep: and yet there is the absence of all vital colouring from those cheeks—and the breath comes not from between those lips. Her form is motionless, though not yet stricken with the rigidity of death. O Ariadne! I knew thee but for a few hours; and yet in that short time—But this is childish on my part," ejaculated the Baronet aloud, as he made a sudden effort to master his emotions: then feeling that his eyes were dim and that tears were trickling down his cheeks, he no longer sought to check the natural current of his grief;—and sitting down on the edge of the couch, he took the hand—the small cold hand—of Ariadne in his own; and averting his eyes from her marble countenance, he said aloud and with a passionate outburst of feeling, "I cannot bear to look upon that inanimate countenance, which was so lovely in its animation!"

Then for upwards of a minute he remained in that position, wrapped up in the deepest thought; until at length regaining somewhat of his lost firmness, he rose abruptly—threw one last lingering look upon the deceased—and then quitted the room.

On the landing outside he found the Marquis waiting for him; and in silence did they proceed back to the apartment where they had previously conversed.

"That young girl, Lord Leveson," said the Baronet, in a deep and solemn tone, "has a brother who will sooner or later come to demand an account of his sister. Of me will he demand that account, inasmuch as I had written to him to state that she had found an asylum—an honourable asylum—with me; and when he comes therefore to inquire for her, what answer am I to give?"

"You will not compromise me?" said the Marquis, in a tone of earnest entreaty. "Can it not be averred that, rendered homeless by the fire, the damsel was consigned to the care of my housekeeper or niece, whichever you like to name—but that she died of the fright produced by that conflagration?"

"Yes—this tale must indeed be told," said the Baronet. "And now let instructions be given for the funeral of the poor girl."

"And what name is to be placed upon her coffin?" asked Lord Leveson inwardly rejoiced to find that no exposure was to take place.

"What name!" repeated the Baronet. "There is no reason *now* why her real name should be concealed—therefore upon her coffin-lid have inscribed the words, *Ariadne Varian*."

"What!" ejaculated the Marquis, immediately struck by the name: "surely, this poor girl—"

"Yes—I know what is passing in your mind," said Huntingdon, in a mournful tone: "she was the sister of him the narrative of whose escape you have read in the newspapers."

"But her brother," exclaimed the Marquis—"is he not a fugitive? and will he ever come to claim his sister?"

"If I can obtain for him a free pardon, for which I am about to interest myself," returned the Baronet. "But of all this no matter;—suffice it for you Lord Leveson, to know that I am interested in the young man's behalf. Would to God that it were within the range of mortal power to recall his sister to life!"

With these words Douglas Huntingdon hurried away in a state of mind, such as he had never experienced before.

CHAPTER LXXXVII.

SYNCOPE AND TETANOS.

Dimly and feebly did a sense of returning consciousness steal into Ariadne's mind—slowly, slowly as the glimmering of dawn struggles against the mists of night in the eastern horizon. Whether she had fainted or slept she knew not: nor indeed had she the power to reflect upon the point—for her thoughts were all in confusion—not painfully agitating in the brain, but in dull, numb, inert chaos. That there had been a period of oblivion she had something like a distinct notion: but whether it had lasted for days, hours, or only minutes, she knew not—nor had she sufficient clearness of mind to conjecture.

But as the sense of consciousness came back—as this re-awakening of the intellect began to take place—she became aware that there was somebody in the room. She endeavoured to open her eyes—but could

not. Nevertheless, she felt that the light of day was upon those closed lids, and that it was not a stupendous darkness that weighed them down. Amidst the dull and stagnant chaos of her thoughts, flickered in upon her intellect a somewhat brighter beam than the primal one of returning consciousness; and this new ray of intelligence seemed to enlighten her the least thing more distinctly as to her exact condition. She became aware, indeed, that she was stretched upon a couch; but after that vain attempt to open her eyes, she remained for perhaps two or three whole minutes without any farther endeavour to move. Then hearing a voice suddenly speaking near her, the tones flowing murmuringly upon her ears without her being able to understand the words uttered, she instinctively attempted to turn round towards the speaker. But no!—She was bound hand and foot by some invisible and unknown spell—enchained by some stupendous and indomitable influence—turned into a statue so far as her physical being was concerned, and animated with only just a sufficiency of the spiritual essence to give her a dim and twilight idea of her own condition.

Still was her appreciation of this condition too indistinct, too vague, and too obscure to produce any poignant feeling. Sensation she had, it was true—but so lulled, so steeped in a mystic lethargy, so dull, numb, and sluggish, that it had not sufficient vitality for any keenness of reflection, whether painful or otherwise.

Gradually the idea began to become strengthened in Ariadne's mind relative to the presence of some one near her: and at length it seemed as if an inspiration dawned in unto her soul, whispering the name of Douglas Huntingdon. Then she appeared to acquire a knowledge that there was such a person as he in the world; but how or when she had known him before, she had no distinct comprehension. She heard him breathing syllables of sorrow near her; and then she felt him take her hand in his own. A pulse seemed to thrill through her entire frame at that contact,—yes, thrill even pleasurably, as if it were the touch of life giving back animation into one on whom death sat heavy and cold: but yet that thrill was only faint and feeble—and it imparted not complete vitality nor broke the spell that entranced the maiden.

She felt her hand clasped in that of Huntingdon; and she felt, too, by the touch that *his* hand burnt with the fever-heat of excitement, and that *her own* was

as cold as ice. She longed—Oh! how she longed to return the pressure which she felt; for now a strange, vague, and ill-defined perception of the real truth of her condition stole into her mind and make her feel a desire to make known the fact that she was indeed *alive*! But not in the slightest—not in the faintest—not in the remotest degree could she return that pressure; not a muscle could she move—not a nerve quivered in response to her will. The faintest breeze has more power to shake the stateliest tree, than her volition could exercise over her own faculties of motion. Still as death—motionless as statue, she lay—with a gentle glimmering of the spark of life that was just conscious of its own existence, but could not make this existence known to another. And now therefore arose in her mind the conviction that she breathed not though she lived—and on the other hand, that she was not dead though animation was all but utterly suspended."

A still brighter clearness shed its influence upon her mind—that mind which thus, after having first awakened as it were in the midst of a vast hall where a single lamp burnt dimly in the midst of the blackness, now felt as if additional lamps were being lighted up one by one so as to set forth by these slow degrees some fresh features of the place. She heard those words to which the Baronet gave utterance with so much feeling—"I cannot bear to look upon that inanimate countenance which was so lovely in its animation!" Yes—she heard, she understood these words: she even perceived the impassioned vibration of tone which characterised them—the amount of anguish which they expressed! And again did she experience a thrill of the pulse through her entire frame—but a thrill that was felt not by him who held her hand and who believed it was the hand of the dead. Then this hand of hers was quitted by that of the Baronet: the contact had ceased—the fevered flesh and the marble cold flesh touched each other no more—and instead of the thrill of the vibrating pulse, it was an ice chill that struck to the very core of the maiden's heart!

But now she felt—intuitively—instinctively felt—that Sir Douglas Huntingdon was gazing upon her. Her eyelids were closed, as we have already said; but it was in looking upward as it were from the mind itself—by the exertion, so to speak, of an inner sense of vision—that she thus felt that he *was* looking upon her. She could even understand the look—she could

comprehend its nature—lingering, longing, sad and mournful. But, O God! why did she not return it?—just heaven! why could she *not*?

She heard the door close: and now she knew that she was alone. The silence suddenly struck her as being awful, awful in the extreme: and then too, at the same instant, a more horrible clearness sprang up in her mind—a fearful light flaming up in her soul! In a word, she understood all in a moment,—that she was in a species of trance—a syncope—and that she was believed to be dead!

Dead!—great heaven, what awful thoughts now sprang up in her imagination! Was the hand of death in reality upon her?—was she dying?—would she soon be really *dead*? Death! its bitterness was not past—its sting was there—and the grave perhaps would soon assert its victory. But to die—Oh! to die while she felt that she was so young—for her thoughts were now every instant becoming more vividly clear and more keenly perceptive,—to die so young, it was terrible! Then her brother, too—for she now remembered him and thought of him—yes, his image suddenly sprang up clearly and tangibly as it were before her,—this well beloved brother, what would *he* think, what would he say when he heard that she had died thus prematurely, thus suddenly? But no—she could not die—she must not die yet! Innocent, stainless of crime—aye, even immaculate, though she were in mind as well as in body—she was not prepared to die! She would move her limbs—she would turn round on that couch—she would raise herself up—and she would exhibit all the powers of full living, breathing, moving, vitality! Alas! vain, vain were the thoughts—vain the aspirations—vain the endeavours: so far from stirring hand or foot, she could not even move a muscle of her countenance—nor uncloset an eyelid—nor feel her lips quiver with the breath of life!

We said that her mind had now a horrible clearness: and such indeed it was. For her thoughts began to flow in still more frightful and hideous channels—depicting all the paraphernalia of death—the laying out of the corpse (in *her* case perhaps a *seeming* corpse)—the putting on of the raiment of the dead—the enclosing in the shell—the screwing down of the lid of the coffin—the consignment to the grave and the shovelling in of the damp and wormy clay; Heavens! as all these harrowing thoughts swept through the brain of the poor young girl, she endured an agony of

agonies ineffable for human language—an agony all the more agonising because endured by one whose form was motionless and could not bend or yield as it were with recoil, trembling, or shudder, the dreadful influence of those thoughts. And now, with the extremest poignancy was the fact presented to her mind that she was not even *nearly* dead, but that her state was one presenting that phenomenon so strange, so awful, and so terrible in the history of human nature!

The horror produced by all these thoughts gradually merged into the more stupefying state of consternation; and then a dreamy repose stole over the young maiden, Oblivion supervened; and thus for a while were her senses steeped in forgetfulness. How long this interval lasted she however knew not; and when she returned to consciousness she became aware that her posture on the couch was somewhat changed. She was now lying completely on her back; and she felt that her arms were placed close by her sides, and that her feet were likewise in close and parallel contact. Next she perceived, by the sensation, that something was fastened under her chin; and as she began to ponder upon the meaning of all this, the recollection of what had passed just previously to the last interval of oblivion slowly came back to her mind, until at length the awful—the crushing—the appalling thought settled in her soul, that she was laid out as a corpse!

Horror of horrors! With full, poignant and vivid keenness, did all her consciousness return: and she once more became possessed of every faculty of perception. There was no doubt as to her actual position: she knew it—she understood it—she felt it all. She was believed to be dead—she was laid out in the usual manner ere being consigned to the coffin—and the winding sheet already wrapped her form! The thought of all this was maddening, maddening. Her brain appeared to be on fire—and the sensation of gnawing flames had she also at the heart, though that heart beat not. Her eyelids were closed—nor, could she open them! nevertheless lightnings appeared to flash before her vision. It was horrible, horrible to experience all this, and yet not be able so much as to relieve the harrowed feelings with a shudder or a shriek. For when something dreadful meets the eye or strikes upon the mind, it is a relief to shudder in recoil or to send forth an ejaculation from the lips. But here was the unhappy girl bound as it were in the adamant chain,

of utter petrification—a marble body with a soul of fire—incapable of performing the least function of life, and yet inspired with all life's keenest and acutest sensations!

All the faculties belonging to the mind seemed to have concentrated in themselves the vitality which naturally belonged to the body; and all the senses were sharpened to even a painful degree. Thus she could hear sounds the faintest and slightest imaginable—such as insects picking in the wood of the bedstead with the noise of the death-watch! She could smell the clean linen which wrapped her as a winding-sheet, and which perhaps from the nature of the soap used in washing it, had a certain earthy odour that made it indeed appear the raiment of the dead. She could feel all the plaits and folds of these coverments as they lay loose upon one portion of her form and tighter on another: she could feel the linen passing round her head, and the cambric that was tied as a bandage to hold up her chin. Through her closed lids could her eyes perceive the light of the sun streaming through the curtains of the window facing the couch—those beams which borrowed a deeper redness from the hue of those curtains! Thus were her senses acuminated to the keenest edge; and as the body was left motionless, those faculties appeared to exercise themselves with all the concentration of vitality which they had absorbed as it were from the physical powers.

In the midst of her harrowing thoughts she heard the door open, and the housekeeper's voice say in a low and mournful tone, "Walk in—walk in, Mr. Stimson—walk in."

Then the door was closed again very gently; and two persons advanced up to the side of the bed—the housekeeper and the man whom she had called Mr. Stimson.

"What a sweet corpse the dear girl does make," said the housekeeper, assuming a whimpering tone and heaving three or four deep-drawn sighs. "Ah! Mr. Stimson, she wasn't here many hours, but I really had taken quite a fancy to her—she was so amiable and good: and I do believe that in the same short time she grew quite as fond of me.

"Poor young lady!" returned Mr. Stimson, in a hollow and lugubrious voice. "How come it all about, ma'am!"

"Why, you see, Mr. Stimson," resumed the housekeeper, "this young lady was staying at Sir Douglas Huntingdon's, and his house was burnt down last night. Such rapid progress did the fire make, that the dear girl wellnigh fell a sacrifice to the

flames; but a couple of noble-hearted gentlemen—one an officer in the Guards, and the other the son of a Bishop—rescued her at the peril of their lives; and the officer wrapped her up in his great military cloak. Then she was put into a hackney-coach that was passing at the time; and as Sir Douglas is very intimate here, he thought the best thing he could do was to send her to be taken care of by Lady Ernestina. The fright which the young lady received from the fire was no doubt dreadful; but we thought she had quite recovered, and didn't dream that she was in any possible danger. Rut about ten o'clock this morning the poor dear creature seemed to be taken so bad suddenly, that we got quite alarmed: and before we could even send for the doctor she was dead. Lord bless you, Mr. Stimson, she went off just like a child going to sleep in its mother's arms;—and with her dear head, poor young creature, pillowed on my bosom, she breathed her last."

"Well, ma'am," said Mr. Stimson, "it's a very great satisfaction for you to know that you did your best, while deash was doing his wust,—and that she went off like that there, with her head on your buzzim. She's as lovely a corpse as ever I had the measuring of."

"Yes," whispered the housekeeper: "hasn't she got a sweet pretty face—and her flesh is just like wax. Poor thing! the worms will soon make havoc upon it."

"Poor thing!" echoed Mr. Stimson, in his deep sepulchral voice, which he purposely made as hollow and lugubrious as possible. "The wums indeed will prey upon the poor gal."

It can scarcely be necessary to inform the reader that Ariadne's feelings were now drawn to such an extreme tension, that it appeared as if her brain must burst and her heart-strings snap. She had no difficulty in discovering, from the preceding discourse, who Mr. Stimson was. He was evidently the undertaker. But the vile hypocrisy of that woman, the housekeeper—the false version she gave of the circumstances of Ariadne's arrival at the mansion—the assumed sympathy and commiseration with which she sought to play her part in the presence of the undertaker,—all this added to the poignancy and painfulness of the scene. But then the discourse itself—to hear herself styled *a corpse*—then the remark that her flesh was colourless as wax:—and lastly the observation—the frightful observation, relative to the worms soon preying upon

her—Oh! all this was the most exquisite refinement of ineffable agonies!

But this crucifixion of the feelings was not yet passed through. She felt the undertaker place his rule upon her to measure her length for the Coffin; and she heard him mutter to himself, in a low under tone, the exact measurement of feet and inches as he thus took it. Good God! how within herself she battled—Oh! how she battled for the power of sending forth one long loud thrilling shriek!—how she strove—heaven alone can tell how she strove—to force a vent for the transcending agony of her feelings! But no: all her efforts were vain and useless. The spell—the awful spell was upon her: and still like a marble woman was she animated with a soul of fire.

“And so you say, ma’am” observed Mr. Stimson, speaking in a low voice that was well suitable for the chamber of death, but yet with something more of a business tone than hitherto—“and so, ma’am, it is to be a very decent funeral—not over expensive, but respectable?”

“Just so,” responded the housekeeper. “His lordship has entrusted the whole management to me; and I think, Mr. Stimson,” she added in a significant tone, “that you and I can make everything comfortable between us?”

“Oh! to be sure,” responded the undertaker. “Come, ma’am, tell me candidly how high you dare go: and then I can tell you how much profit you and me can sheer betwixt us.”

“Well, I don’t think his lordship would mind sixty or seventy guineas.”

“Very good,” observed Mr. Stimson, with a low hollow chuckle which appeared to issue from a coffin or a vault: “let’s say seventy-five guineas, and then we can divide thirty betwixt us. That will make fifteen for your sheer.”

“Agreed,” said the housekeeper: “but you must send in a regular proper bill, because the Marquis sometimes takes it into his head to look over his accounts.”

“Don’t be afraid, ma’am. I will put down fifteen guineas for a brick grave, and it shan’t be no brick grsve at all. Then, how many do you think will attend the funeral?”

“I don’t know who will attend it: the Marquis, I suppose—Sir Douglas Huntingdon—just for appearance’ sake—and that’s all.”

“Well, we can put down ten mourners,” observed Stimson: “’cause why, the bill must be made out to look respectable. Ten mourners—that will be a

guinea each for hat-band and gloves, and a guinea each for the use of mourning cloaks: so there we have twenty guineas at once. Fifteen, as already said, for the brick grave, makes thirty-five. Coffin, fifteen—makes fifty; shell, five guineas—and use of pall five guineas—there’s sixty. Hearse and mourning coaches, ten guineas—that’s seventy: and ten of my chaps, half a guinea each—there’s five guineas: and that makes up the seventy-five.”

“Well, you really are one of the cleverest gentlemen I ever met with,” said the housekeeper, with a subdued laugh. “But after all, fifteen guineas a-piece is very little to get out of this business.”

“Well,” observed Mr. Stimson, “I’ll manage to add five to your sheer. Let me see—I said fifteen guineas for the coffin; of course I meant a first-rate oaken-one; but I tell you what I’ll do—I’ll give a common one, painted and grained to look like oak—and that’s the way I’ll do it. The poor gal there won’t be none the wiser.”

“Ah! you dear clever fellow,” chuckled the housekeeper in a subdued tone: “a man of your talent. Mr. Stimson, ought to have been Prime Minister, instead of an undertaker.”

“Well, ma’am, I think I *have* got a little talent,” returned Mr. Stimson, with a complacent manner: “but I am very well satisfied with my vocation, and don’t know that I should improve it particular by a change. But I think we have done here all that is required now!”

“One word,” said the housekeeper: “when shall the funeral take place?”

“Suppose we say this day week?” suggested the undertaker. “The corpse is a nice fresh ’un,” he continued, laying his great heavy rough hand upon Ariadne’s cheek, “and won’t spile. Besides, it will look better to take plenty of time for the funeral; ’cause why, we are to pretend to have a brick grave and a oak coffin.”

“Then let us say this day week,” rejoined the housekeeper: and she thereupon quitted the room, accompanied by Mr. Stimson.

Ariadne was once more alone. Alone indeed: but, good heavens! with what hideous, horrible, excruciating thoughts—thoughts that swept like fiery arrows through her brain conjuring images from the charnel-house and the grave! Like ghastly spectres treading to the solemn measure of a dirge, did they pass in array before her mental vision. Yes—for she was treated as one that was dead—laid out as a corpse, and had just been an ear-witness

to the arrangements devised for her own funeral! She had felt the rule of the undertaker taking her measure for a coffin; and she had felt likewise his rough hand laid upon her cheeks with the cold brutal indifference of one who is accustomed to handle *the dead*! And then that woman, who had affected so much sympathy in her behalf, was now actually trafficking in her supposed death—trafficking for profit to be derived from the funeral of her whose fate she pretended to deplore. And then that coldblooded, heartless, hypocritical scoundrel—the undertaker himself—he also was making a market of the dead: he also was practising the slimy ways of the money-grubber in respect to the supreme and most solemn rites of mortality and of the Christian faith.

All these circumstances—all these reflections—combined to aggravate, if possible, the horror which previously filled Ariadne's soul: and she already felt as if she were in the depths of the cold grave, with the clay filled up over the coffin:

Again did the stupor of oblivion enwrap her mind: and when she re-awoke to consciousness utter darkness rested upon her closed eyelids. The silence and the blackness of night entombed her—stupendous night, always fraught with vague and dreamy fears even for those in fullest health, but now marked by ten thousand terrors for her who was alive in the secrecy of her own sensations, but dead to the exercise of all faculties—dead also to the world without!

CHAPTER LXXXVIII.

THE TRANCE CONTINUED.

Immediately upon quitting Leveson House, Sir Douglas Huntingdon repaired to Carlton Palace and sought an interview with Venetia. Lady Sackville at once received the Baronet in the breakfast-parlour where she was seated at the time; and pointing towards a newspaper which lay upon the table, she said, "My dear friend, it was with the sincerest sorrow that I read the half dozen lines in that journal which mention the fire at your house last night. It is however a subject of congratulation that you are safe. But you look dreadfully careworn and haggard

"No wonder, Venetia," observed the Baronet, "after all that I have gone through."

He then sat down and gave her an account of everything that had transpired within the last two days. Commencing his narrative from the moment when he parted with Louisa Stanley at Dartford, he proceeded to describe the perilous adventures of Shooters' Hill. He told Venetia how circumstances had thrown Ariadne in his way—how she had saved his life at the hut—how they had fled together—and how he had given her an asylum at his own house: he then explained who she was, and in confidence revealed to Lady Sackville's ear those particulars relative to Theodore and his sister which have been made known to the reader in a previous chapter. Lastly, he narrated the circumstances of the young girl's abduction to the Marquis of Leveson's house, and concluded with a description of her death.

At first, when he began to speak of Ariadne, Sir Douglas observed that Venetia's beauteous eyes glittered somewhat with a jealous uneasiness; and naturally flattered by this proof that he was very far from being an object of indifference to the lovely idol of fashion, he cautiously abstained from uttering a word calculated to show that Ariadne had made the slightest impression or a tender character upon his heart. He spoke of her in a tone of compassionate friendship, and speedily observed that a gleam of satisfaction stole over the features of Lady Sackville. But when he came to that portion of his narrative which described Ariadne's death—or rather her supposed death,—when indeed he explained now the sensual brutality of the Marquis of Leveson had been the cause of the lamentable catastrophe—Venetia's splendid countenance coloured with indignation, and she murmured between her set teeth, "That detestable Marquis of Leveson! will the day of retribution never dawn for *him*?"

"And now, my dear Venetia," resumed the Baronet, "I will explain to you in a few words the object of my visit. Indeed you must grant me a boon this moment—you must do me a service without delay

"You know, my dear Douglas," she responded, with a peculiar look of mingled tenderness and significance, "that there is nothing you can demand of me which I am not prepared to grant. Tell me, therefore, how I can serve you. But I think I can already conjecture:—is it not the pardon of Theodore Varian that you require?"

"It is, dearest Venetia—it is," replied the Baronet.

Lady Sackville spoke not another word ; but rising from her seat, quitted the room. She remained absent for about an hour, at the expiration of which interval she returned and by the smile of satisfaction that played upon her charming lips, Sir Douglas saw that she had succeeded.

"This is the pardon—the full, free unconditional pardon of Theodore Varian," she observed, handing the Baronet a paper. "Fortunately the Secretary of State was with his Royal Highness at the moment : and therefore the document is duly countersigned. I explained to them both a sufficiency of the particulars connected with the case of Theodore Varian to prove that he was as much sinned against by his late master Emmerson, as sinning : and I likewise told them in confidence a little of his poor sister's history. The Minister therefore made not the slightest objection to grant the pardon and as for his Royal Highness," added Venetia, proudly "of course *he* was instantaneously prepared to grant my demand."

"Ten thousand thanks, dear Venetia, for this prompt kindness on your part," exclaimed Sir Douglas Huntingdon; glancing his eye over the paper ere he consigned it to his pocket. "And now you will excuse me for leaving you abruptly, inasmuch as I am anxious to transmit this pardon to Theodore Varian, together with the letter containing the sad intelligence of his sister's death."

"And do you purpose," asked Venetia, "to veil from Mrs. Varian the infamy of the Marquis of Leveson towards his sister?"

"Of what avail, Venetia, will it be to augment the sorrows of this already too unfortunate young man? Besides, I myself have not been immaculate enough in my life to feel justified in becoming the accuser of others; but on the other hand I have so many faults of my own to screen, that I consider it but just to throw a veil if possible over the faults of my friends or acquaintances."

"Well, be it so, Douglas," observed Venetia. "And now depart to execute your purpose with regard to Varian: I will not detain you a minute longer. But remember," she added, with a meaning look, "I shall always be delighted and happy to see you."

"Ah! Venetia, do not fancy that I am not likewise too happy to find myself in your society:"—then hastily raising her hand to his lips, he hurried from the room.

Returning to the hotel where he had taken up his quarters, he sat down and penned a letter to Theodore Varian. In this epistle he broke to the young brother as gently as he could the intelligence of the sister's death, which he attributed to the shock produced by the conflagration upon the previously attenuated mind of the young girl. This letter, accompanied by the pardon, Sir Douglas Huntingdon at once sent off by a courier to Dover in the hope that the messenger might overtake Varian previous to his embarkation for France; but if not, the courier was instructed to lose no time in following the young man to the Continent. Having adopted these measures, Sir Douglas Huntingdon turned his attention to his affairs: for he felt for the first time in his life the necessity of expelling thought by means of bustle and occupation. Indeed, the image of Ariadne was uppermost in his mind: and frequently, did he find himself giving way to the gloomiest reflections, and pondering upon her whom he had known but for so short a time and who had been so rudely and suddenly snatched away from him, as he thought, *for ever!*

In the evening Doctor Copperas called at the hotel; and on being shown to the room where the Baronet was sitting alone after dinner, the physician expressed himself much shocked at the tidings he had relative to the death of his fair patient.

"One or two circumstances have rather astonished me in this matter," observed the doctor as he sat down to take a glass of wine with the Baronet: "one is that the poor girl should have been sent to find an asylum at the house of the Marquis of Leveson, who is an unmarried man—or rather a widower: and the second that I, being the medical attendant of the young lady was not called in this morning when she was found to be dying. At all events, if his lordship had not chosen to send for me, he would at all events have acted prudently in summoning that truly wonderful man—the greatest ornament of his profession—I mean Doctor Thurston."

"My good friend," returned the Baronet, "your two objections are very easily met. In the first place, it was necessary to consign the young girl to the care of some kind-hearted lady; and being acquainted with Lady Ernestina Dysart, I thought it best to send the poor creature to her. Secondly, the Marquis of Leveson was unaware that you were the medical attendant——"

"Enough, enough!" ejaculated Doctor Copperas; "I am perfectly satisfied with what you have said, my dear Sir Douglas. But perhaps you will permit me to observe that in these cases of rapid sinking and speedy dissolution arising from fright, there are so many curious phases and phenomena that they never ought to be lost sight of by the medical man in attendance at the time. Now I feel perfectly convinced that if that very remarkable authority Dr. Thurston had been called in on this occasion, he would have given to the world a most valuable treatise upon the subject."

Sir Douglas Huntingdon was in no humour to converse with so tedious a personage as Doctor Copperas: he accordingly fell into a deep abstraction—and the physician, having dilated for about twenty minutes upon the merits of Doctor Thurston as a medical practitioner and the learning of Doctor Thurston as a medical authority, took his leave.

A couple of days passed; and the Baronet's confidential domestic James returned from Dover. He had succeeded in finding Theodore Varian, and had delivered to him the messages and the purse of money sent by the Baronet, whose advice it appeared the young man had promptly followed by repairing to Calais. Indeed, James had seen him embark on board the hoy; and thus was it clear that he had quitted England ere being overtaken by the messenger who bore his pardon.

The next day Sir Douglas Huntingdon proceeded to Leveson House to inquire how the preparations proceeded for Ariadne's funeral. The Marquis was not at home at the time; and Lady Ernestina Dysart, who detested the Baronet ever since his interference in the affair of Louisa Stanley, affected to be retained in her own room by indisposition. The housekeeper accordingly took upon herself to answer the Baronet's queries; and she assured him that the most satisfactory preparations were being made. Sir Douglas Huntingdon desired the woman to conduct him to the chamber where Ariadne lay; for he experienced an irresistible longing to behold once more in death that sweet countenance which had made so deep an impression upon him in life. The housekeeper accordingly proceeded to what was believed to be *the chamber of death*; and the moment the Baronet crossed the threshold a feeling of indescribable awe mingled with the profound mournfulness which already filled his heart.

But when he beheld that wax-like countenance on which there was nothing of the ghastliness or loathsomeness of death,—when he beheld it fresh and damask-like as it was in life—the only appearance of death being the utter absence of all vital tint.—he could not help exclaiming, "Good heavens! surely she does but sleep."

The housekeeper shook her head with an assumed melancholy, as she observed in a low tone, "When no positive disease or previous illness is the cause of death, the corpse frequently remains thus fresh and well preserved."

"Death!—is this indeed death? can it be death?" mused the Baronet, in a low tone to himself, as he stood agazing down upon that countenance so soft in its very rigidity, so sweet in its immovability, so full of ineffable expression in its utter stillness. "If this be death, then death is not terrible: no—it's nothing but a slumber a little more profound than that into which we sink at night—only, only to this slumber *here* there is no awakening! This is the eternal night that on earth no dawn."

While thus musing, in a low tone, Sir Douglas Huntingdon had bent over the form of the young girl who lay stretched upon that couch: and a tear dropped from his eyelash upon her cheek. With his cambric handkerchief he gently wiped it away, murmuring between his lips, "Poor Ariadne—poor Ariadne! if you had lived, the feeling which you had already inspired and which I experience now in my soul would have expanded into the strongest and purest love—and you should have been my wife!"

Then stooping down, he gently kissed her alabaster forehead, and turning abruptly away, hurried from the room, followed by the housekeeper.

If anybody a few days previously had told Sir Douglas Huntingdon that within a week he was destined to be moved by such feelings as these—destined to experience the influence of such melting, chastening, and reforming thoughts trooping through his mind—he would have ridiculed the prophecy and laughed at the prophet. But no man can say how soon the sentiment of love may animate his breast, nor how quickly it may enthrone itself in the sanctuary of the heart!

It was now the afternoon of the fourth day of Ariadne's supposed death; and during this period a profound stupor had entranced her thoughts at such frequent and for such long intervals that her soul, rent with a million tortures when awake,

was thus refreshed and invigorated as it were by those periods when its agonies were numbed in syncope and its thoughts steeped in oblivion. But to describe the reflections and the terrors which she experienced when awake, would be to recapitulate that delineation of the feelings which we have previously attempted. We may however observe that occasionally did a gleam of hope penetrate through the murky clouds that girt her soul—a hope that she might yet be enabled to shake off the trammels of this tremendous spell which was upon her and give evidence of her vitality before being consigned to the coffin and buried alive?

She was awake—and she was giving way to this hope at the moment when Sir Douglas Huntingdon paid that visit which had just been alluded to. She immediately recognised his voice as he stood speaking musingly by the side of the couch; and with that keenness of sense which has previously been mentioned, she could hear as plainly all that he said as if he were speaking in a much louder tone—whereas the housekeeper who stood close by, could not catch the meaning of his words. And by a sort of mesmeric influence, also, did Ariadne become aware that he was gazing down upon her. Yes; and it seemed as if through her closed eyelids she could even observe the nature of that look, so full of a mournful tenderness: and then ineffable feelings sprang up in her heart—and when she heard him murmur those words avowing his love and deploring that she had not lived to become his wife, the poor girl felt for a moment as if she were being suddenly gifted with the power to cast off the spell of the trance, fling her arms around his neck, weep upon his breasts and prove that she was alive! That was a moment—a single moment of beatific feeling for the unfortunate Ariadne: but the darkest, deepest, blackest despair suddenly seized upon her soul as she felt herself still tied down to that couch—still enchained in motionless rigidity—still cold and lifeless as marble in body though with a mind that was every instant flaming up with the accumulated violence of a thousand volcanos?

Then she felt the tear-drop upon her cheek. Heavens! it seemed to sink down into her very heart. Oh! that tear! that tear! it was a pledge of love—Good God! what mockery for her to dream of such bliss as that which is concentrated in the word love!

Deeper—yes, deeper, deeper, down into the lowest abyss of despair was she plunged as all hope abandoned her. Then she

felt the tear wiped away from her face; then the kiss was imprinted upon her brow;—and then there were sounds of hurried retreating steps—and the door closed again—and she was once more alone. Yes: and once more did she relapse into that stupor which gave her mental energies the means and the leisure to repose, and regain their strength in order to put forth their excruciating vitality again?

When she next awoke she became aware that there was a candle or a lamp in the room. Through her closed eyelids could she distinguish where it was; and then she heard several heavy feet moving about the chamber, though with an evident endeavour that their tread should be as light as possible. A horrible suspicion sprang up in the poor girl's mind: and it was almost immediately confirmed by other sounds which struck upon her ears. These sounds were those of wood coming in contact with wood—one thing being lifted upon another: and then she knew that the undertaker's men were in the room placing the shell upon the tressels!

It instantaneously struck her that if ever the excruciation of her mental agonies should become sufficiently keen to inspire her physical being with new life, this must be the moment. If the asphyxia should now prove stronger than that anguish which was torturing her soul to such an extent as apparently to render it capable of inspiring marble itself with motion, then in that case did it seem as if all hope might be really abandoned. She felt her mind struggling within—or rather she made it struggle with all the violence of desperation to force it as it were to give vent to its feelings in any one of the numerous evidences of life: such as a shudder—a shriek—a stretching forth of the arms—a turning of the head—an opening of the eyelids—or even a quivering of the lips. But no: nothing of all this could she accomplish. Her mind was imprisoned in a form rigid and impracticable as marble: and it seemed to her as if she herself were vainly struggling for emancipation from the interior of a stone sepulchre in which, like a Roman vestal of ancient times, she was walled up!

But we cannot describe the full horror of her thoughts on this head: we must leave the reader much to imagine and depict unto himself. For now the moment—the dread moment had come when Ariadne was to be placed in the shell. It was from habit that the undertaker and his men trod as gently as possible in the

room—from habit that they spoke in undertones suited to the chamber of death—from habit that they laid their hands upon her gently and delicately. It was habit all: for in their nature they were no more susceptible of sympathy than other men. On the contrary—from being in the frequent companionship of the dead, they knew neither awe nor pity. Indeed, their feelings were much blunted and their hearts much brutalized by their avocation: and if a proof of this were wanting, it might have been found in the fact that the housekeeper, knowing their predilection, at this moment entered the room with a tray containing a bottle of spirits and several glasses. Thereupon the undertaker and his men turned away from the couch, and approached the toilette-table where the housekeeper deposited the tray.

"Now, ma'am, will you jine in?" asked Mr. Stimson, as he filled all the glasses round.

"Well, I'll take a *leetle* drop, so as not to seem unfriendly," said the housekeeper.

"That's right, ma'am. And now," continued Stimson, raising a brimming glass to his lips, "here's your wery good health, ma'am—and here's his lordship's health too—and wishing us all good luck:"—with which benediction the undertaker screwed up his eyes, as if to shut out the fume of the liquor as he tossed it down his throat.

Having refreshed themselves with a dram, the servitors of death returned to the couch, and once more resumed their hold upon Ariadne. Not the concentrated anguish of ten thousand racks—not the essence powerfully condensed of all the most refined excruciations of the Inquisition—can convey an adequate idea of the agony of agonies which the young girl now endured. All such ideas as the coiling of fiery serpents around the form—of burning alive in condescent flames—of tearing off the scalp and dropping boiling oil upon the brain laid bare—of flaying alive and searing the excoriated flesh with red-hot iron—of passing red-hot needles through the eyes, all such ideas as these, we say, fell incomparably short of the illimitable agony endured by the poor girl as the undertaker and his men lifted her from the bed and put her into the narrow shell.

This being done, the men retraced their way to the toilette-table, and regaled themselves with another dram.

"I never did see a corpse keep so fresh," observed Stimson; "there's no oozing out of the mouth—no discolouring under the

eyes—not even any particular blueness of the nails. And then, too, she felt as limp and supple as if only in a fit."

"But I shouldn't like to be only half as dead for all that," said one of the men. "Poor thing," he continued, with the mechanical utterance of the sympathetic ejaculation: "she'll be discoloured and blue enough in a few days—and she'll get stark and stiff enough, too, before she's put into her coffin and screwed down."

Screwed down! good heavens, what dreadful words—overwhelming as a torrent, devouring as a conflagration, crushing as a thunderbolt! Life appeared now to be really ebbing away from the statue-like form of Ariadne Varian: oh! how she wished that she might be really dying—that her spirit might be indeed passing, so that she could avoid that crowning horror—that transcendent catastrophe, *being buried alive*! Again did a stupor come over her: again were her senses oblivion.

The undertaker and his men remained in the room until they had emptied the bottle of spirits; and they took their leave of the housekeeper and their depature from the mansion.

Presently—she could not tell how long after the stupor had fallen upon her—a roseate radiance appeared to be shining all around Ariadne. She was no longer in the shell—no longer wrapped in the garments of the grave—no longer laid out as a corpse. She felt as if she had been wafted into some other sphere: and a strain of sweet celestial music came floating upon her ears. Then, as those silver octaves made the air melodious, she fancied that she beheld angel shapes hovering before her eyes—shapes of seraphs, and of sylphs; with azure garments and white wings. The music swelled into the divinest symphony, exultant throughout the vast regions of space; and it seemed to the maiden that she was wafted quick and unimpeded, but by some invisible power, through the starry firmament,—mingling with aerial beings of indescribable beauty. And ineffable pleasure pervaded her soul as she called to mind all the horrors from which she had just escaped; for the barrier between life and death seemed to be indeed passed over, and herself emancipated from the trammels of earth and now soaring in heaven. Presently a form of angelic loveliness and radiant with the sunniest smiles, came floating through the roseate atmosphere,—a female form clad in streaming robes of azure and of gold arranged in alternate foldings and spangled

with countless gems. The long yellow hair floated like a beaming meteor, diffusing an enhanced glory all around. But nothing could equal the celestial benignity and seraphic joy that mingled in that beauteous countenance: so that under this angelic figuration Ariadne recollected not immediately the features of her mother—her long dead mother! Now indeed she knew that she was in heaven: and extending her arms towards the advancing shape, she anticipated the next moment to be clasped to its bosom,—when all in an instant the sweet and ecstatic thoughts filling her soul were turned into horror and dismay—the angel shape vanished from her view—utter darkness suddenly entombed her—and down, down she sank as if into an unfathomable abyss!

Down, down she kept descending: down, down into the blackest darkness, where the only change was that made by hideous shapes blacker than the blackness, darker than the darkness itself! Yes—all was confusion and whirl in her brain—a series and a change of mental agony. Now all of a sudden a tremendous light appeared; and in the distance were seen the inextinguishable but unconsuming fires of hell. No nearer however to them did she approach—but kept falling down, down, far beyond the influence of the molten flames that filled the vast and blazing prison of Satan's kingdom. But as her eyes remained fixed upon that region of fire, she saw that it broke into the shape of immense buildings—vast palaces, tremendous domes, and colossal pillars—all made of the living flame and exhaling the red atmosphere which hung like a lurid cloud above it. Still also as she gazed, she observed the back-ground of that vast city of Satan,—a back-ground forming hills, and mountains, some covered with forests, others merely dotted with groups of trees, but all wrought as it were out of the lurid opaque fire. Still keener and keener grew the maiden's power of vision. She now beheld the windows of all the houses, mansions, and palaces in that city of hell; and she saw that those windows were defended by immense bars of fire. But now the entire city seemed to be made of red hot iron,—every feature of the place of one colour—everything formed of one material. And through these bars she beheld myriads of shadowy forms, all red and glowing as if they themselves were penetrated with fire, or heated as it were to a candescent and almost transparent state. Keener grew her vision still: and she saw more. She beheld ineffable anguish depicted on every

countenance—an anguish such as no living language can describe. In the palaces she beheld the shapes of those who had once been the kings and queens of the earth; but their crowns were now of red hot iron, fastened with red hot nails upon their burning but unconsuming heads. Their sceptres had changed into fiery serpents—their orbs into scorpions of flame. The purple, the scarlet, and the ermine robes that decorated them on earth were succeeded by a flowing vesture of flame; and if in any region of hell the fire was hotter and the torture more agonising than elsewhere, then was this supremacy of all excruciations to be found in these palaces of the kings and queens. In the great mansions where the shades of those who had been prelates and church-dignitaries upon earth, and who having made religion a means to heap up wealth and honours for their own aggrandisement, were now deservedly enduring retribution in the ebbless and eternal waves of flame that swept through the mansions of red hot iron. And in other mansions were the lords and those who had been great ones upon earth, but who having made earth a heaven for themselves and a hell for the masses of their fellow-creatures, were now enduring the real hell of the other world.

But gradually all this tremendous spectacle began to fade away from Ariadne's view; and still she appeared to be falling down with the velocity of a flash of lightning—until all was dark once more. Then gradually she awoke to the consciousness that she had been passing through the phases of a dream wherein she had beheld both heaven and hell!

Then where was she? Were these thoughts—these harrowing thoughts that poured back into her memory, laden with horrible reminiscences,—were all these a dream likewise? Was it a dream that she had been in a trance—that she had been treated as one dead—and that preparations were made for her funeral? Was all this a dream—ah! dared she think so? But, no: great God! no—it was not a dream! She was *there*—in utter darkness—unable to move—pent up in the narrowest possible space: yes—she was in a trance—and she was in her shell!

Another two days passed away; and during the interval very brief indeed had been the moments of consciousness endured by the unfortunate girl. But it was now on the sixth evening of her supposed death, and while she was suffering the tortures of a more vivid sensibility than she had experienced for forty-eight hours

past, that the door of the chamber was opened—and again did the undertaker and three or four of his men enter the apartment. They bore something with them, too—something heavy and also hollow—something that knocked against the wood-work of the doorway as they brought it in—something ominous and dread to think of! Yes—just heaven! it was the damsel's coffin that they brought.

Her coffin!—but she is not dead—the light burns in her soul, although it ceases to shine forth to the view of the world: the lamp is not extinguished—the oil of life is not exhausted. Then—wherefore seize upon her now?—wherefore carry her away from the midst of the world to which she belongs, to consign her to the raw damp solitude of the grave? Oh! it is because she is believed to be dead—and thus as a corpse she is to be treated. Now to her mind rush the many things she has heard in her life relative to people being buried alive—of coffins being opened years after the interment, and the wretched inmates being found to have turned on their sides or their faces, or to have gnawed their own flesh for sustenance: and now, just heaven! was such to be her fate?

Speaking of sustenance, reminds us to observe that though several days had elapsed since food had passed Ariadne's lips, yet that she experienced neither hunger nor thirst—no, nor yet that sinking at the stomach which is usually felt through want of nourishment. All vital actions of the system were suspended or suppressed in a physical sense: the body seemed to be dead—all its wants and necessities dead likewise;—and yet all the senses, how keenly were they alive!

Yes—the coffin was brought in and deposited upon the floor. The undertaker and his men then lifted the shell from the tressels, and placed it inside the coffin: they then raised the coffin itself upon the tressels, leaving the lid loosely lying on the top. Scarcely was this done when the door opened again; and the housekeeper entered. Ariadne knew by the rattling of the glasses that the servitors of death were about to regale themselves once more with spirits. Such was the case: but this time the tray was not placed upon the *toilette-table*—nor on a chair—nor on the bed—nor yet on the chest-of-drawers—no, nor on any articles of furniture in a chamber; but upon the coffin-lid itself! And then the undertaker and his men, together with the housekeeper, all stood round that coffin and drank the spirit which were poured out.

"Well, Mr. Stimson how do you think the corpse looks now?" asked the housekeeper.

"Unchanged and fresh as ever, ma'am," was the response. "I never did see such a beautiful corpse in all my life. We'll leave the coffin-lid off till the last moment, because the body's so fresh. If we screwed it down, it would precious soon begin to decompose."

Decompose! good heavens, to talk of this in the hearing of one who was not yet dead;

"Well now, the funeral's for the day after to-morrow, at eleven o'clock in the forenoon," observed the housekeeper; "and Sir Douglas Huntingdon has told me that he means to attend—so does the Marquis, out of respect for Sir Douglas."

"Well," replied Stimson, "we shall have two mourning-coaches—one for his lordship and the Baronet, and t'other for me and three of my men to look like mourners and make the funeral respectable. I always choose the most sorrowful looking of my people to go with me in a mourning coach and it has a very good effect. But last time—that was about a month ago—one of 'em tumbled into the grave when we got to the churchyard, 'cause why he got blazing drunk."

"Well, we mustn't have any drunkenness here, Mr. Stimson," said the housekeeper, in an authoritative-tone; "the Marquis would be in a frightful way if you didn't all keep perfectly sober."

Here the colloquy ended—the liquor was disposed of—the party of death's servitors, together with the housekeeper, retired—and Ariadne was now alone.

Alone—in her coffin!

CHAPTER LXXXIX.

THE COFFIN.

It was the morning of the funeral. The blinds were drawn down throughout the front of the mansion: but no mutes appeared at the door, the obsequies being merely *respectable* and not *fashionable*.

From the period of being placed in her coffin, Ariadne had known but a few minutes of consciousness up to about ten o'clock on the morning of which we are now writing: and then she was awakened as it were from a profound sleep by hearing a strange noise. Gradually did consciousness resume its way in her soul,—that consciousness which, every time it

returned after an interval of stupor, was accompanied by so many harrowing memories so many poignant reminiscences. But on the present occasion Ariadne was longer than usual in collecting her ideas and marshalling her confused thoughts so as to arrive at the comprehension of the full horror of her position. Indeed, at first she could not possibly conjecture, what that strange noise might be a noise which nevertheless grated so ominously in her ears and jarred against every chord in her heart! It was a fearful noise a sound well calculated to inspire dread horror even before its full meaning was comprehended. But when the damsel's thoughts settled down into the proper cells of her mind—when her idea became so disciplined as to take a consecutive order in her memory—then did the chain of her recollections lead her on to the comprehension of this hideous noise that was grating and jarring close by her ears,—and she felt—she knew—she understood that she was being screwed down her coffin!

Let it not be thought that during the many intervals of consciousness which Ariadne had experienced, from the first moment of her seeming death until the present time,—let it not be thought, we say, that she had forgotten to appeal to that Almighty Being in whom she put her faith. Far from it: all her thoughts during those intervals were a homage to the Deity and were interwoven with a train of reflections constituting a worship. For she had faith—the sublimest faith in the goodness, the wisdom, and the power of the Almighty;—and thus was it that occasionally, as we have before stated, she experienced a gleam of hope—thus was it also that she had been led to dream of heaven. It was not because she experienced bitter, burning moments of agony, excruciating intervals of horror, and fits of the blackest despair,—it was not because she thus felt all the weaknesses of human nature generally and of her own sex in particular, that the reader must suppose she did not pray or that she did not maintain her faith in heaven. She *had* prayed—and she prayed now: in her soul did she pray deeply and fervently while the hideous noise of the coffin-screws grated upon her ears as they secured that lid which now seemed the barrier between herself and all earthly hope!

Her mind still retained a vivid clearness. She could think calmly, collectedly upon the past—upon the awful present—and upon the future in which she put her faith. She hoped that her spirit would

soon leave its moral habitation and fly to those eternal realms whereof she had a glimpse in her dreams. But as yet, although the coffin-lid was screwed down, she experienced no sense of suffocation—doubtless because the faculty of breathing was suspended in that state of asphyxia wherein she was wrapped. But it was from the coming scenes of the tremendous drama that her soul now recoiled so shudderingly,—the lowering into the grave—the shovelling in of the earth—and then the remaining in the clayey depth, perhaps to linger for days and days—Oh! this was the horror, the agony, the anguish!

But while these thoughts were fastening their gnawing vulture-talons upon her brain, the door of the chamber opened, and she almost immediately heard the voices of the Marquis of Leveson and Sir Douglas Huntingdon. Yes—through the crements, penetrated those voices; and one sank down—deep down into her heart!

"Who will accompany us?" inquired Huntingdon, his voice made tremulous with a profound sorrow.

"I know of no one besides yourself and me who can attend as mourners," returned the Marquis. "For appearance' sake the undertaker and some of his men will follow in a second coach—"

"Appearance' sake!" said the Baronet bitterly. "But no matter—it must be so. And now, if everything be in readiness—"

Here Ariadne's senses began to fail her—the stupor returned—and she heard no more."

But scarcely had oblivion thus poured its opiate balm into her soul, when the door of the apartment was opened hurriedly, and a servant made his appearance saying to the Marquis, "My lord, a young man desires to see either yourself or Sir Douglas Huntingdon immediately. He wanted to come up—but I would not let him—"

"Ah! it is no doubt Theodore," interrupted the Baronet.

"What! the brother," murmured the Marquis: then seizing the Baronet forcibly by the arm, he said in a low but rapid and earnest tone, "You will not compromise me—you have promised not to compromise me—"

"No, no," interrupted the Baronet, impatiently: then turning to the domestic, he said, "Let the young man come up."

The servant withdrew: and less than half a minute the door opened again,

and a genteel good looking but careworn, and emaciated young man made his appearance. But the moment all the dread emblems of death—the coffin on the tressels—the undertaker and his men creeping about like black snakes, as they prepared the cloaks put on the hat-bands, and looked out the gloves,—in fine, as all the sombre features of the scene were embraced by that young man at a glance, he staggered against the door-post, and a deep convulsing sob denoted the fulness of his mental agony.

"Mr. Varian, I presume?" said the Baronet, advancing and taking the young man's hand.

"And you are Sir Douglas Huntingdon?" was the tremulous and indeed broken response: but although Theodore could say no more at the instant, yet he pressed the Baronet's hand in token of ineffable gratitude.

"It is a melancholy scene for you, Mr. Varian," continued Sir Douglas; "but you must bear up with becoming fortitude against this affliction."

"Oh! that I had been here in time to fling one last look upon her sweet face—to imprint one last kiss upon her forehead!" murmured Theodore, clasping his hands and sobbing convulsively. "It would not bring her back to life—it would not restore to me my dearly beloved sister: but nevertheless, it would be a satisfaction—a melancholy, mournful satisfaction——"

"Do you really wish it, Mr. Varian?" asked Sir Douglas, deeply moved by the young man's almost heartbroken anguish.

"I do. I do," he answered eagerly. "You know not, sir, how fondly—how devotedly I have loved that dear sister of mine. Ah sir, it was for her sake that I fell into the ways of error—But let that pass!" he exclaimed, suddenly checking himself as he was reminded by the Baronet's look that there were many strangers in the room; and although they of course knew who he was, since his name had been mentioned on his entrance, yet it was by no means necessary to enlighten them as to all the details of the past.

"Your wish shall be attended to, Mr. Varian," said the Baronet. "It is but reasonable—it is but just; and moreover, it will not detain the funeral procession many minutes:"—then, turning to the undertaker, he said, "Remove that coffin-lid once more—this gentleman is the brother of the deceased."

"Mr. Stimson and his men immediately set to work to obey the command they had

just received; and in a few minutes the lid of the coffin was lifted away. Theodore Varian then approached, with that species of hesitation and reluctance which characterizes the first glance which a loving one bestows upon the beloved dead; but on reaching the head of the coffin, he stood gazing down fixedly and mournfully upon the beautiful countenance of his sister. Sir Douglas Huntingdon also approached and contemplated the pale wax-like face of Ariadne; and at this moment, doubtless under the influence of the fresh air, the stupor abandoned her again and consciousness returned.

"Behold your sister, Mr. Varian," murmured Sir Douglas Huntingdon, in a trembling voice: "how little is she changed, although in death!"

"She looks as if she only slept," returned Theodore, his own voice more tremulous still. "Alas, alas, poor sister! beautiful was thou in life—beautiful art thou in death: and now thy soul is in heaven!"

Ariadne heard the two voices—the voice of the Baronet and the voice of her brother: and her ear lost not a single syllable that either voice thus uttered. But now those voices ceased, and were succeeded by the stifled sobs that proclaimed all the bitterness of Theodore's anguish. Heavens! would no revulsion now take place in the conditions of her being? Yes—she felt a quivering at the heart—such a sensation as she had not hitherto experienced throughout her trance; and almost at the same instant her brother exclaimed in a tone wild with mingled hope and fear, "good heavens! her lips moved!"

"Alas, no!" said the Baronet: "it was but the fitful play of a sunbeam through the opening in the window curtain."

"No, no!" cried Varian, in a tone of the most passionate and fervid exultation: "it is no dream—no delusion—There behold it now!"

"Almighty powers! it is so," exclaimed the Baronet. "She lives—she lives!"

All was now the most extraordinary confusion and excitement in that chamber. Ariadne was lifted out of the shell and placed upon the couch,—a quivering of the lips and a faint or rather scarcely audible gasping, now being the unmistakable signs of returning consciousness. The undertaker and his men were hurried out of the room with the paraphernalia of death: Lady Ernestina and the house-keeper were summoned thither; and Sir Douglas Huntingdon himself sped away to fetch Doctor Copperas. Fortunately the

physician was at home at the moment; but scarcely had the Baronet explained to him in a few hurried words the resuscitation of Ariadne, when he exclaimed, "I will hurry off to Leveson House at once: but do you proceed to May Fair and fetch that truly eminent man, Doctor Thurstan."

Away sped Doctor Copperas in one direction and the Baronet in another. Doctor Thurstan was at home: and on being informed by Sir Douglas of what had occurred, he said, "Most fortunate is it that Doctor Copperas has hastened to take the case in hand. There is not another man in England who has such experience in occurrences of suspended animation."

While thus speaking, Doctor Thurstan put on his hat and gloves, and accompanied the Baronet to Leveson House, where in the meantime Ariadne had returned to complete consciousness. We need hardly say that the scene which then took place, between the brother and sister thus reunited under such extraordinary circumstances, was touching in the extreme. Theodore strained Ariadne to his breast and covered her with the tenderest caresses. Ernestina and the housekeeper, fearful that some explanation might take place on the part of the damsel relative to the treatment she had received at the mansion, besought Theodore to withdraw alleging as the reason that this prolonged excitement on the part of Ariadne might be followed by a relapse. But when the young girl beheld the housekeeper at her bedside and caught a glimpse of the Marquis of Leveson at the other extremity of the room, she clung tenaciously to her brother's neck murmuring in low and broken accents, "Do not go, dearest Theodore—do not leave me—Oh! do not leave me again, I beseech you!"

The brother saw by the affrighted manner in which her azure eyes swept their looks around, that she was in dread of those present; and it instantaneously flashed to his mind that she had perchance experienced some foul play, and that he was not as yet acquainted with *all* the circumstances of her supposed death. Indeed, when first informed, through the medium of the Baronet's letter, that his sister had died beneath the roof of the Marquis of Leveson, vague and undefined suspicions of evil had sprung up in his imagination; for the name of *Leveson* was known to him as that of a nobleman much addicted to pleasure. This suspicion now appeared to receive confirmation from Ariadne's

affrighted manner: but it was not the moment and it was not the place for him to make inquiries into past circumstances. Indeed, he had scarcely time to breathe a few reassuring words in Ariadne's ear, when Doctor Copperas arrived.

The young maiden at once recognised the physician, and welcomed him as a friend. The housekeeper, observing that Ariadne viewed her with evident mistrust and aversion, stole out of the room; and the Marquis speedily followed her. Lady Ernestina however, remained: and by at once adopting the kindest, most soothing, and the tenderest manner towards Ariadne, she made a favourable impression both upon the damsel and Theodore. In a short time Doctor Thurstan arrived, accompanied by the Baronet; and as Ariadne almost immediately inquired of the latter concerning excellent and kindhearted Mrs. Baines, he at once volunteered to go and fetch her. Ariadne expressed her joy and gratitude at the proposal; and Sir Douglas accordingly sallied forth again, while the medical men adopted such measures as their skill suggested to guard against a relapse on the part of the resuscitated maiden.

In about twenty minutes the Baronet returned with Mrs. Baines; and affecting to a degree was the meeting between that worthy woman and Ariadne. Indeed, Mrs. Baines declared her intention of remaining at Leveson House to act as the damsel's nurse until her complete restoration to health; and thus the now happy girl found herself the object of the kindest attentions and surrounded by friendly faces.

But in the meantime the Marquis of Leveson and his own housekeeper were seriously alarmed lest Theodore Varian should learn sufficient from his sister's lips to induce him to make an exposure of their infamous treatment towards her. Sir Douglas Huntingdon however, presently sought an opportunity of speaking to the Marquis upon the subject.

"Ariadne is now past all danger of relapse," he said. "The physicians have left her for the present; and she remains in the care of my housekeeper, Mrs. Baines. Of course the chamber which she occupies in your house must be her home until her health will permit her removal elsewhere. Her brother is now about to accompany me to my hotel, that we may have some conversation together. He already suspects that his sister has experienced ill-treatment of some kind; and therefore it is my intention to tell him all the truth at once. But I trust that by my earnest recommendation he will be induced to pass over, if not

actually to forgive or forget, your conduct towards his sister. Exposure will benefit no one; and innocent though she be, would nevertheless wound the delicacy of Miss Varian herself. Her brother will doubtless admit the justice of this reasoning: and therefore I do not think that you need labour under any apprehension of his vengeance."

"I thank you much--most sincerely--for these assurances," said the Marquis. "Pray make my peace with the young man: and tell him that if a few hundred pounds will be of any service--"

"I am very much mistaken," interrupted the Baronet, with ill-concealed disgust, "if Theodore Varian be not quite a different person--"

"Well, well, there's no harm in mentioning the money matter," said the Marquis, painfully anxious to avoid exposure on any terms; for he knew full well that if it became noised abroad that his house contained such auxiliaries to his sensuality as the mechanical chairs, the indignation of the populace would be so excited that his life would not be safe. "But you and I, Huntingdon," he added,--on what terms are we to remain in future?"

"Lord Leveson," said the Baronet, in a tone that was rather sorrowful than angry, "I am not enough of a saint myself to enable me to take up stones to cast at you: but at the same time I think that there are extremes into which it is possible to plunge in the gratification of one's passions--and deep into those extremes have you been hurried."

With these words the Baronet turned away; and quitting the room, he joined Theodore Varian, who was waiting for him in the hall. The two left the house together--the young man feeling fully satisfied that in Mrs. Baines his sister had a tender nurse as well as a careful guardian and a true friend,

As for Mr. Stimson--he and his men amidst wonder and amazement at the resuscitation, bore away all the paraphernalia of death: but as the bill was promptly paid by Lord Leveson, the undertaker found nothing to complain of.

"And now, ere closing this chapter we must state that Dr. Copperas, on returning home, state down to pen a detailed account of the case of resuscitation, in the course of which he declared "that his treatment of it was materially assisted by the advice of that truly remarkable man, "Doctor Thurston:" while, on the other hand, Doctor Thurston likewise sate down to pen *his* narrative, which he interlarded

with many compliments to "that ornament of his profession, Doctor Copperas." These statements appeared respectively in the next Numbers of the *Scalpel* and *Splint*, and created a marvellous sensation throughout the medical world.

CHAPTER XC.

MOTHER FRANKLIN.

It will be remembered that the Hangman and Bencull had resolved, after due consultation, to make away with the formidable Bow Street officer, Mr. Lawrence Sampson. Their project was to entice him, by some means or another, down to the dark crib in Jacob's Island, where three or four of the gang would lie in readiness to put the murderous scheme into execution; while the Hangman himself was to call at Larry's house in Long Acre on some pretence and get possession of the Police-Book. With a view to the effectual carrying out of this plan, Nell Gibson had been selected as the most fitting instrument of the plotters; and at the same time the Buttoner had been appointed as a spy upon her actions.

It was necessary to remind the reader of these particulars and we must add that although the Hangman's gang subsequently discovered certain proofs of what they believed to be Nell Gibson's treachery towards them in respect to their dealings with Sir Douglas Huntingdon, they had agreed, after calm deliberation, to conceal their knowledge of the young woman's additional perfidy in respect to the note which had been intercepted by the Buttoner. To that resolve they had come as we described at the time, with a view to ascertain whether she were also betraying them with respect to the plot initiated in reference to Larry Sampson.

It was now a week since the memorable night of the fire; and if, at about six o'clock in the evening, we peep into Mr. Lawrence Sampson's comfortable parlour at his house in Long Acre, we shall behold him sitting by the fire reading a book and discussing a glass of wine. Presently the door opened; and his housekeeper Dame Margery came to announce that a very old woman who refused to give her name, wished to speak to him. The Bow Street officer, who never refused to see any body on business, at once desired that she should be admitted: and accordingly the visitant was shown into his presence.

Dame Margery withdrew: and Larry Sampson instantaneously recognised the old harriidan, who, bent double with age, now advanced towards him, shaking her head and wagging her toothless jaws with a horrible kind of mysterious significancy.

"Do you know who I be?" she asked, in a voice something between a cackle and a squeak.

"Yes--to be sure," responded Larry: "you are Mother Franklin--and you live over at Mrs. Young's in Bermondsey. Now then, what do you want with me."

"Ah! I thought as how you would know who I was," said the old woman, with a merry laugh, which nevertheless struck hideous upon the ear. "You know every body, Mr. Sampson--and every body knows you."

Thus speaking, Mother Franklin took from her pocket a round snuff-box with an indecent picture upon the lid: and while regaling herself with a pinch, some of the snuff got into her throat, thereby exciting so painful a cough that it seemed as if the old hag was about to choke, while the scalding rheum poured down her wrinkled cheeks, leaving her eyes horribly red and bleared. She was wrapped in an old dingy red cloak, with the hood drawn over her head; and she walked with a stick. Her whole appearance was therefore not unlike that of one of the lowest and most wretched class of vagabond fortune-tellers: and now, as she stood shaking from head to foot with that prolonged hacking cough Larry Sampson could scarcely avoid turning away from her in disgust.

"Well, what is it you want with me?" he inquired again, after a sufficient pause to allow the harriidan to recover from the effects of the snuff getting into her throat.

"I can do you a service, Mr. Sampson," she said, now taking a seat: "a werry great service too, I can assure you."

"But it is doubtless to do yourself a service at the same time, Mother Franklin," observed Larry; "or else you would not come to me. Therefore pray get to the point at once, and tell me what you want."

"There's a plot agin you, Mr. Sampson--a deep-laid plot," said the old woman, looking at him significantly with her bleared eyes "and if you don't mind, it will be the wuss for you--that it will!"

"Ah! I am constantly hearing of plots and schemes against me," observed the Bow Street officer, with an air of indifference: "but you see I survive them all. However, if you have really anything to tell me, do it quickly--describe your

motives in thus putting me on my guard, and also say what reward you expect."

"The reward I shall leave to you, Mr. Sampson," replied the old harriidan; "for I know you will treat me well. I shall be eighty-nine come next Feviverry: and that's age which you now, hasn't that Gibson gal been three or four times with you?"

"Just so," replied Sampson. What then?"

"She's playing you false, sir," resumed Mother Franklin: "it's all a plant of the Hangman's and Bencull's, I can promise you."

"I had my suspicions, I can assure you," observed Sampson, with his habitual coolness. "Go on."

"I'll tell you all--but it will be best to begin at the beginning. Well, sir, one day the Hangman called at your house--this werry house, I mean," continued the old hag: "and somehow or another he managed to get into a secret room of your's where there's a many dresses--and he also saw a great big book that you've got and where you write down everything that happens. Ha! ha!" laughed the hag, shaking her head significantly! "you see I know something worth your knowing--and you also see by the same token that I am telling the truth. Well, in that great book the Hangman read a many things, and all about you addressing up yourself as a knife-grinder and going down to Folly Bridges--that's Jacob's Island, you know--and getting chucked into the ditch. So, you see, the Hangman found that you know a good deal too much to suit him and the rest of the gang; and so he has planted Nell Gibson upon you to 'tice you down to the dark crib, where you'll be done for: and at the same time the Hangman means to come here to your house and get hold of the great book, so that it mayn't fall into the hands of any other Bow street runner."

Larry Sampson certainly was very far from being prepared for all this information: but he outwardly manifested no surprise. Surprised he however really was, to hear that Daniel Coffin had managed to obtain admission to his secret chamber: but what he was now told in respect to Nell Gibson, only confirmed certain suspicions which he had previously entertained relative to the purport of three or four visits which she had paid him."

"Now, Mrs. Franklin," he said. "I see that you are telling me the truth; and here's ten guineas for you," added Larry, counting the gold pieces down upon the

table." The next thing you must do is to let me know how you happened to discover all that is going on, and why you now come and betray the matter to me. Do this, and you shall have another ten guineas upon the spot."

For years and years past, the wages of crime had not been so abundant at any one period, for Mother Franklin, as the harvest which she was now reaping; and with a chuckle of delight she secured the first ten guineas about her person, and then proceeded to give those explanations that should ensure to her the second two guineas.

"Well, Mr. Sampson," he said, "the truth is that Nell Gibson has always been harsh and bitter towards me; and I hate her—I have long hated her. Then the Hangman, too—he jeered, and taunted, and laughed at me one night; and I swore to be revenged—for I hate him also. So, seeing that he had something secret to say to Nell Gibson, I listened at the door. Ha! ha!" laughed the hag, with her hideous cackle: "my ears were sharp enough *then*, I can tell you; and as luck would have it, no one disturbed me in the passage all the time I was listening at the door. So I heard everything that passed; that's how I came to know what was going on. Ever since—for this was more than three weeks ago—just at the beginning of November—ever since then, I say, I have listened, and watched, and peeped, and peered, at all that was going on; and what with catching a word now and a word then, and hearing a bit of a whispered conversation at one time and a bit at another, I found out that the plot was still going on agin you—that Nell Gibson had been to you several times with a rigmarole tale—and that she fancies you are quite falling into the snare. Well, Mr. Sampson, she's coming up to you to-night; and so I managed to get away for a couple of hours on some excuse, just to give you this warning. But if you want again to know why I do it, it is because I hate the Hangman—I hate Nell Gibson also. *She* has called me a witch—and *he* has called me a beldame; and *she* threatened to leave Mother Young's establishment if I didn't hold my tongue—and *he* tossed me a shilling—a beggarly shilling—as if I was a beggar! And so for all this," shrieked forth the hag, raising her voice in a horrible excitement, "I want revenge—I want revenge—and now I shall get it!"

The thrilling querulous tone to which her accents had risen, soon merged into a

cough, so sharp and convulsing that it almost seemed to shatter the old witch to pieces: and a horrible spectacle was she with her toothless jaws wagging, her head shaking and the scalding rheum pouring out of her bleared eyes.

"Ah! I could let you into a many secrets if I chose, about the Hangman, and Nell Gibson, and all the rest of the precious gang," continued the hag: "and I will do it soon too—for they've all took to bullying and baiting me just because I am a poor old woman that will be eighty-nine come next Febiverry. But here's one thing I'll tell you, Mr. Sampson but pray mind and never say that you heard anything from my lips or that I peached against them folks——"

"Oh! that is an understood thing between you and me," exclaimed Sampson. "Proceed Mrs. Franklin, with what you were about to tell me."

"Well, sir," she resumed, "from a conversation that I overheard it seems that it was the Hangman's party which caused the fire at some Baronet's t'other night——"

"Ah! Sir Douglas Huntingdon's, you mean," interjected Sampson. "But how was that?"

"Why," returned the old hag, "the fellows got into the stable with the intention of breaking into the other part of the house; but somehow or another their lantern broke, and the light falling on some hay or straw, set the whole place into a blaze. Ha! ha! all their wickedness shall come out soon; I'll unmask them, the villains—I will!" she cried again exalting her voice into a querulous thrill. "But I can't stay any longer now. I must get back as soon as possible. Another time I'll tell you more. At all events, I've told you enow for the present to put on your guard against your enemies, Mr. Sampson."

Having thus spoken, the harridan received the second ten guineas, and took her departure mumbling to herself. "Ha! now I shall be revenged. Daniel Coffin said he should have the satisfaction of tucking me up before he died; but I shall have the pleasure of seeing him swing to the gallows tree—ha! ha! ha!"

About an hour afterwards Nell Gibson was ushered by Dame Margery into the presence of the Bow Street officer.

"Well, it is for to-night," said the young woman the moment the housekeeper had retired, and she found herself alone with Larry Sampson.

"Ah! it is for to-night, eh?" he said, affecting to fall most credulously into the snare spread to entmesh him. "And where is the conference to take place?"

"Down at Bencull's dark crib," replied Nell Gibson, fixing a searching glance upon Sampson so as to penetrate into the depths of his soul and thus assure herself that he really suspected nothing.

"Now, let us understand the whole thing thoroughly, so that there may be no mistake," he observed, motioning Nell Gibson, to take a seat and handing her a glass of wine. "According to what you have previously told me, the Hangman's gang contemplated some desperate and astounding deed of villany, the nature of which is however unknown to you. They have already had two or three consultations, from which you have been excluded; and now to-night the last consultation is to be held, to settle the whole plan and arrange all the proceedings. Is not this it?"

"That is exactly how the matter stands, Mr. Sampson," replied Nell Gibson.

"Well, then," resumed the officer "you must now tell me all over again exactly what you propose; because having a great many different things to think of, I may not perhaps exactly remember all you have said to me at our previous interviews."

"I can explain myself over again in a very few words," said Nell Gibson. "You must understand that at the back of the dark crib there is a sort of gallery, overlooking the ditch——"

"Yes—and overhanging it also," interrupted Sampson. "After you came to me on the first occasion, I went down to the Folly Bridges and took a survey of the place. Of course I had often been there before; but after what you told me I thought it best to get an accurate idea of the locality. And now please to continue your explanations."

"Since you have been down to the place to look at it so particularly," resumed Nell, "you may have noticed that if you get on the wooden bridge you can easily climb along to the gallery at the back of the dark crib; and there you can lie concealed, listening at the window to all that takes place inside the back room."

"Well, the plan is feasible enough," observed Sampson, steadily and composedly meeting the keen and penetrating look which Nell Gibson fixed upon him from beneath her eyelids; and thus while she fancied that he did not perceive how

intently though furtively she was watching him, he not only saw that he was thus scrutinized but also encountered the scrutiny without exciting a suspicion. "And how many do you think will be there to-night?" he inquired.

"Ah! there will be several of them," answered Nell Gibson: "for the best part of the gang are in this business: and that's the reason why I know it must be something of the utmost importance."

"And have you failed to wheedle the secret out of the Buttoner? for he is your fancy man, I believe," said Larry Sampson.

"The Buttoner is as close as the door of Newgate and as down as the knocker itself," replied Nell. "When he was drunk I have tried to pump him; but it was all no go. Besides which, the Buttoner never will trust a woman; and so if he did tell me anything, it couldn't be relied on as true—it would only be some invention of his to put me on a wrong scent. But I know that whatever the business now in hand may be, there's murder in it—and also the hope of an immense booty——"

"And how do you know this?" inquired Sampson.

"Because the Buttoner cleaned up his pistols this morning, and sharpened the blade of a hideous clasp-knife that he's got. He didn't think I paid particular attention to what he was doing: but I did though. Moreover, I dropped in, quite in a leisurely way, at the dark crib this afternoon; and I saw Bencull busy examining his pistols also. The Mushroom Faker arrived at the dark crib last night, and brought his pistols with him—and I heard him say in an under-tone to Bencull something about its being very probable that they should soon have more money than they would possibly know what to do with."

"But could not you by some means or another, secret yourself in the gallery behind the dark crib and hear what is going on to-night?" asked Sampson, raising a sort of objection merely to prevent Nell Gibson from thinking that he fell too readily into the snare.

"If I could, you may depend upon it I would," she answered: "but it's impossible. I must get back now as quick as I can to Mother Young's; and I shan't be able to stir out again all the evening. No Mr. Sampson—this is a thing that you must take in hand yourself: and remember that when I first came to you, our solemn understanding was that whatever took place between us was not to be communicated to a third person. But I must be off

now," she exclaimed, rising from her seat as she heard a clock in another room striking eight.

"But I have not yet given you any portion of the reward that you stipulated for," observed Sampson.

"I will come for it when the business is over," said Nell Gibson. "Besides, the best and most welcome reward that I can have, is to revenge myself for the ill-treatment of the Buttoner—the insulting taunts of the Hangman, because I refused to submit to his wishes and the coarse brutality of that detestable Bencull. In fact, Mr. Sampson, as I have told you before, I have a thousand wrongs to avenge against those villains; and now is the time."

Yes—there shall be ample revenge for you, Miss Gibson," observed Larry, "Whatever these fellows plot and plan to-night, shall send them all to the scaffold. But what time will they be assembled in their ruffian conclave?"

"At about eleven o'clock," returned Nell. "If you secrete yourself in the gallery at that hour, it will be ample time."

"And you are certain that there is no danger of any of the fellows going out into that gallery?"

"Not a bit of it," responded Nell Gibson: "you will not incur the slightest peril."

The young woman then took her departure; and when she was gone, Larry Sampson thought within himself, "The plot is a clumsy one; and even without Mother Franklin's warning, I should not have fallen very readily into the snare. But that Nell Gibson is a clever and a cunning girl, and performs her part well. However she and her comrades will all be astonished at the lesson I shall read them to-night."

The bow Street Officer then resumed the perusal of his book with as much calmness and composure as if nothing extraordinary were on the tapis: but at about half-past nine o'clock he prepared to sally forth,—having previously, however, given some special instructions to his housekeeper relative to the mode in which a *certain person* was received during his absence.

Meantime the Hangman, the Buttoner, the Mushroom Faker, and Bob the Durrynacker, were all assembled at the dark crib in company with Bencull. This precious company were seated in that same room at the back to which our readers have been previously introduced; and the table was as usual covered with the

materials for drinking and smoking—or, as the men themselves expressed it, "a regular booze."

"Well, do you still think your blowen is staunch in this matter?" asked the Hangman, addressing himself to the Buttoner.

"I have no reason as yet to think otherwise," was the response. "But of course, after the tricks she has already played us, it is impossible to say. She ought to be back by this time; and then we shall see what she says."

"And if she did mean to betray us in anyway, how should we know it?" asked Bencull.

"She can't betray us into Sampson's power for anything particular we are doing at this moment," observed the Hangman. "All the harm she can do, is to put him up to snuff respecting our intention towards him; and in that case of course he won't come down and hide himself in the gallery."

At this moment a knock was heard at the street-door; and Bencull hastening to answer the summons, gave admittance to Nell Gibson. The young woman entered the back room with her wonted calmness and self-possession. Indeed, there was no reason why she should look or feel otherwise; inasmuch as so far from contemplating any treachery in the present instance, she had faithfully and as she believed, *successfully*, performed her part in the drama now in progress.

"It is all right," she said taking a seat next to the Buttoner. "Larry Sampson, having nibbled at the bait for the last three weeks, has now swallowed it completely; and he will be in that gallery at eleven o'clock to-night."

"And you don't think he suspects anything, Nell?" said the Hangman inquiringly, as he looked at her intently from beneath his overhanging brows.

"I am sure he does not," she answered, with perfect composure. "Or if he does, then is he the greatest adept at concealing his thoughts that I ever saw in all my life."

"Well, of course, he is all that," growled Bencull; "but I should have thought that you was more experter still, Miss Nell, and so you might have seen whether he took it all in for gospel or not."

"Again I tell you," said the young woman, now speaking somewhat impetuously, "that as far as I could possibly judge, Larry Sampson believed I was performing a real part. But I suppose that after what occurred on Shooters' Hill, you mean to suspect everything I do, and every word I speak? Now, then, I tell you

again, and for the last time, that you are wrong! I tried to save Huntingdon because he was the first man—in fact the only man I ever loved: and what I did the other night I would do over again; for I wouldn't have a hair of his head injured. But in other matters I would die sooner than betray you—yes, by God! I would die first."

And having worked herself up to a pitch of powerful excitement, she struck her clenched hand so forcibly upon the table that bottles and tobacco-pipes all danced and rattled as if the door of the room was upheaving with an earthquake.

"Come now, Nell, none of this nonsense," said the Buttoner: "we ain't suspecting you at the present moment. In fact han't we promised to look over what you did t'other night on Shooter's Hill, if so be we saw that you proved faithful in the little business now in hand?"

"Well, and you *will* see too, returned Nell Gibson sulkily. "But I suppose you don't want me to wait any longer?"

"No," replied the Buttoner: "you can be off and get back to Mother Young's. There's enough of us here to do the business without you. But here—take a drop of summut short first:"—and he handed her a glass of spirits.

"Well, here's success to you," said Nell, her good humour returning—and she tossed off the burning alcohol: then replacing the glass on the table, she took her departure.

"I raly don't know what to make of that gal," said the Buttoner after a brief pause "I have been her flash man for the last three weeks, and can't understand her yet."

"She's as deep and artful as the devil" said Bencull, "and that's why I first of all recommended her in this job. But if so be she should turn her artifice against us—"

"Then, by Satan! she shall suffer for it," exclaimed the Hangman, rising from his seat and buttoning up his coat.

"Aye, that she should," said the Mushroom Faker.

"And I would help to do for her," added Bob the Durrynacker.

"Well, we shall know more about it presently, I dare say," observed the Hangman. "And now I am off up to Long Acre to call at Larry's and see if I can get hold of the police book. I hope when I come back in two or three hours or so," he added, with a look ominously ferocious, "I shall hear that Larry Sampson is deep down at the bottom of the ditch."

"Then jerking his thumb significantly over his shoulder towards the window, the Hangman put on his hat and quitted the room.

Bencull, the Buttoner, the Mushroom Faker, and the Durrynacker now remained together at the dark crib smoking and drinking and conversing on the business which they had in hand. Once or twice Bencull went out to the street door, to ascertain, as he expressed himself, "what sort of a night it was;" and returning on each occasion to his companions to report that the moon was coming out clearer and brighter, they with one accord regretted that it was not pitch dark, considering the enterprise they had in progress. For although none of the inhabitants of Jacob's Island might be supposed to be over particular, yet it was somewhat too serious an affair to have the eyes of neighbours catching a glimpse of any murderous proceeding by the aid of moonlight. But this risk must however be run; and the four ruffians made up their minds accordingly.

After repeated references to a huge silver watch which he carried in his fob, Mr. Bencull at last intimated that it was now eleven o'clock; and the Buttoner was just suggesting that they should wait another quarter of an hour before rushing out into the gallery, when a knock was heard at the street door.

"Who can that be?" said Bencull, in a tone of vexation. "Perhaps old Jeremy Humpage—or the Swag Chovey Bloak—"

"Well, whoever it is," interrupted the Buttoner, "he mustn't be let into our secrets. Tell him there's summut wery partickler and private going on——"

"Oh! leave me to make an excuse," growled Bencull; and taking up the light he went to the door.

But no pen can describe the mingled astonishment and dismay which seized upon him, when the flickering rays of the candle fell upon the countenance of Mr. Lawrence Sampson!

CHAPTER XCI.

THE RESULTS OF THE PLOT.

"Ah! Bencull, how are you?" said the Bow Street official, in an easy offhand manner. "The fact is that I wanted to have a word or two with you, and thought this as good a time as any."

Thus speaking, Mr. Sampson unceremoniously entered the house—passed by Bencull—and proceeded straight to the room at the back. Bencull, recovering somewhat from his astonishment, hastily shut the door and followed close behind,—the light which he carried revealing the person of the newcomer to the Buttoner, the Mushroom Faker, and the Durrynacker. These individuals were as much astounded as the landlord of the place had been, on beholding the object of their murderous purpose thus familiarly and coolly appear before them. He was attired in his usual manner, and had his hands thrust into the depths of his capacious breeches'-pockets.

Entering the room and throwing himself leisurely upon a chair, Mr. Sampson glanced around him with a peculiar smile, observing "Well, there are no strange faces here. I have had the pleasure of being acquainted with every one of you for a long time past—personally at least if not to speak to."

There was a slight accent of irony in his tone and a similar expression in his look; so that the four ruffians exchanged dubious and inquiring glances with each other, as much as to say, "What on earth does all this mean?" Indeed, they knew not what to think nor what to do; but with a sort of consternation upon them they awaited in silence for Larry Sampson to explain himself farther."

"Now, my good friends," resumed the officer, pushing his chair back against the wall so that no one could get behind him, and then lounging in it with an easy and confident manner, as if he felt assured that though in the lion's den, he was perfectly safe: "now, my good friends," he repeated, "don't you think that all your united wisdom—especially when combined with that of Daniel Coffin—should have devised some scheme more feasible and likely-looking than this clumsy affair which you have trumped up to ensnare me?"

"Trapped by goles!" exclaimed Bencull, his countenance becoming black as thunder.

"Nosed upon, as sure as fate!" muttered the Mushroom Faker.

"Done brown!" added Bob the Durrynacker, also in an under-tone.

"Perdition seize that Nell Gibson!" murmured the Buttoner between his set teeth, as he clenched his hands with convulsive violence,—his mind being already intent on a horrible revenge for what he supposed to be the perfidy of his mistress.

"Need I tell you what ridiculous figures you cut?" resumed Larry Sampson, secretly enjoying their confusion: "but I only wish that your accomplice Nell Gibson was here, to see how completely all her artifices have been penetrated by me. As for your friend the Hangman, I suppose he has gone up to my house in the hope of obtaining possession of my secret register. He will be miserably disappointed," added the officer drily.

"You are talking the Chinese langvidge. Mr. Sampson," growled Bencull, endeavouring to put a good face on the matter, if possible. "We don't understand you there ain't no plot—no scheme—no nothink——"

"Denial is useless, my good fellow," interrupted the officer. "You expected that I should be concealed in the gallery outside here at eleven o'clock: but instead of that, I thought it would be better to drop in as I have done, and tell you to beware in future how you plot against me. After the glimpse which the Hangman obtained of my secret book one day, he should have known that there are few things done in London which escape my knowledge: and perhaps you will be surprised when I tell you that the origin of the fire at Sir Douglas Huntingdon's House a week ago is known to me——"

"Then, by goles!" shouted Bencull starting from his seat, "there's no doubt as to who——"

"No doubt at all!" exclaimed the Buttoner, dashing his clenched fist violently against the table.

"Patience, patience," said Larry Sampson coolly. "I tell you that it is vain and useless for you to conjecture how I obtained my information. Every crime committed in London is known to me; but it doesn't always suit my purposes to bring them at once to justice"—then fixing his eyes upon Bencull and the Buttoner, he said, "You two men and Daniel Coffin were the authors of that fire at Sir Douglas Huntingdon's! You forced an entrance into the stable with the intention of breaking into the dwelling-house: but the light fell from your lantern, and the place was soon in a blaze. Is this true?" or is it not? "Fools!" ejaculated Larry Sampson contemptuously; "if such a mysterious circumstance as that is known to me in all its details, how do you think that this miserable clumsy under-plot of your's could escape my knowledge?"

Bencull and the Buttoner now exchanged looks of gloomy alarm: for they felt persuaded that they were about to be

apprehended on account of the burglary and fire at the Baronet's;—while the Durrynacker and the Mushroom Faker likewise fancied that such was to be their two comrades' fate. Indeed all four villains made sure that the dark crib was surrounded by Sampson's runners; and for this reason they did not offer to lay a finger upon the formidable functionary himself.

"Although such a pack of hang-dog scoundrels as you," resumed Larry, "deserve no mercy at my hands, yet I do not mind putting you at your ease in one respect: and that is," he continued addressing himself particularly to Bencull and the Buttoner, "I do *not* mean to take you two up, nor yet your friend the Hangman, for that business at Sir Douglas Huntingdon's. Not that I am over desirous to show you any leniency, but because I cannot make use of the evidence I have obtained to bring the deed home to you. So now," he added, "let me give you a word of warning—which is, that if you don't break up your gang, get out of London and disperse over the country as quickly as possible, I will hunt you all to the gibbets. Now I have given you fair warning: and I hope you will be wise enough to take it."

"And what's to prevent us from knocking you on the head and shoving you out, into the ditch?" exclaimed the Buttoner, suddenly struck with the idea that if Larry Sampson had not come thither for the purpose of effecting any arrests, it was very probable he was unattended by his myrmidons.

"You will not attempt any such thing," answered Sampson coolly; "because in the first place I should shoot you through the head;"—and as he spoke he drew forth his hands from his capacious pockets, each hand being armed with a double-barrelled pistol. "Moreover," he continued, "if you just tap at that window, three or four of my men will rush in from the gallery; and at the first report of these pistols, half-a-dozen more of my runners will break into the house from the street. So now you are forewarned of the consequences of any attempt to molest me."

The Buttoner sank down upon his chair again in gloomy sullenness: and Bencull, lighting a pipe; puffed away with the air of a man who feels himself in unpleasant circumstances, but endeavours to appear as unconcerned as possible. As for the Durrynacker and the Mushroom Faker, they tossed off frequent bumpers of spirits doubtless to arm themselves with courage

for any emergency that might ensue. But Mr. Sampson in reality seemed to have no inclination to push matters to the extreme on the present occasion; and replacing his pistols in his pocket he said, "Now Mr. Bencull, I will thank you to go first and open your street-door for me."

The landlord of the dark crib was too well pleased at this command not to obey it with alacrity: and the Bow Street Officer issued forth from the den of infamy. Immediately upon emerging into Mill Street he blew a whistle with a peculiar note of shrillness and Bencull, keeping the door ajar in order to watch till the "enemy" had departed, perceived that this was the signal for the runners to leave the vicinage of the dark crib. Larry Sampson passed up the street; and one after the other Bencull counted no less than eight runners whom he recognised as they followed at short intervals. Then, when the coast was once more clear, he shut the door and returned to the room where his three companions had remained.

"Betrayed—basely betrayed!" he growled forth as he replaced the light on the table and flung himself upon the bench.

"Yes, and there's no doubt as to who's betrayed us," said the Buttoner. "Nell Gibson alone have peached about that business at Sir Douglas Huntingdon's. I dare say instead of having gone back to Mother Young's she's cut and bolted. But at all events I'll go and see."

"No, stay here, old feller," exclaimed Bencull: "let's do nothing hastily—for there's no telling how Larry may have his eye upon us. At all events let's see whether the Hangman comes back—and if so what he says."

This advice was adopted; and the four ruffians applied themselves with renewed energy to the spirits and tobacco, in order to cheer their minds after the scene that had just taken place, the particulars of which afforded them ample food for discussion till about half past twelve o'clock, when the Hangman returned.

Bursting with the fury of his pent-up feelings, the diabolical nature of which was reflected upon his countenance, Daniel Coffin no sooner entered the little room than he demanded what had taken place. In a few hurried words the required explanations were given, and he in his turn was then called upon to describe how he had fared in Long Acre.

"By Satan! I scarcely know that I shall have patience enough to tell you," he exclaimed, his naturally hangdog countenance

suddenly assuming a look so truly diabolical that his companions felt their blood run cold in their veins for a moment. "But however, let me try and compose myself to a task that is ten thousand times more unpleasant than tucking up a feller at the Old Bailey. Well, on reaching Long Acre a little after eleven, I knocked at Sampson's door, and Dame Margery—that's old housekeeper, you know—almost immediately opened it. '*Pray ma'am, says I, is Mr. Sampson at home?*' just for all the world as if I hadn't the least idea that he was out.—'*No, sir, he is out,*' say she in such a civil manner that I really thought the old girl didn't recollect who I was, but she speedily undeceived me on this point saying, *I think you are Mr. Coffin, if I mistake not?—Well, ma'am, says I, 'Daniel Coffin is my name for want of a better.' But it's very provoking that Mr. Sampson is out; for I want to speak to him very particular.*'—'*I think he said he was going down to Jacob's Island,*' observes the old housekeeper; and you may be assured that I was deuced glad to hear this, because of course I felt certain that he had fallen into the trap.—'*Do you think he will be long, ma'am?*' says I.—'*I dare say a couple of hours,*' she answered: *but can't you call back again or else perhaps you will walk in and wait till he comes home?*'—'*Well, ma'am,*' says I, not appearing to catch too greedily at the offer, although it was just what I wanted, *'perhaps that's the best thing I can do.'*—'*Walk in then, sir,*' says Dame Margery so polite and civil and simpering I never saw anything like it: and so, she showed me into the breakfast-parlour and there left me. I let about ten minutes elapse; and then thinking that the coast must be clear, I took a candle—stole out of the parlour—crept up the stairs—and was within half-a-dozen steps of the landing, when lo and behold! the light of the candle suddenly showed me three Bow-street runners sitting on the top step, each with a brace of pistols in his hands! You may easily suppose that I was taken so aback I didn't know what the deuce to do; while a voice seemed to whisper in my ears, '*You are betrayed! you are betrayed!*' The three runners burst out laughing; and one of them cried, '*Holloa, Daniel! what are you doing here?*'—'*Why, I only walked up in a fit of absence of mind,*' says I, no better excuse coming into my head at the instant: '*but what are you doing here?*' '*Oh! only mounting guard over the police-book, which somebody or another has vowed to possess*

himself of to-night. But of course such a respectable gentleman as you, Mr. Coffin, can't have come here for any such purpose:' and then the three scoundrels burst out into such another hoarse laugh that I could have killed them on the spot. In fact, I was more than half a mind to fall foul on them; but seeing that the game was all up with regard to Larry, and that whatever I might do would only put me deeper into his power, I pretended to put a good face on the matter and tried to laugh away my confusion. They didn't make any attempt to detain me; and so I wished them good night and got out of the house a precious deal quicker than I entered it. By Satan! I was never in such a precious rage in my life! I could have blown up the whole world with gunpowder if I had had a chance. I was actually boiling over with a passion that it hurt me to keep down. While hastening back here as quick as I could, a thousand strange thoughts entered my head. I fancied that I should find you all arrested, and that I was only suffered to go at large from Long Acre in order to be enabled when returning either home to Fleet Lane, or else coming down here at the Folly Bridges. Then I thought that perhaps Larry only meant to make a joke of it after all. So what with some hesitation and a good deal of desperation, I resolved to come straight on here and learn what had taken place. But one thing was all the while uppermost in my mind—and this was, that Nell Gibson had betrayed us!"

"There's no doubt of it," exclaimed Bencull, savagely. "And now what's to be done?"

"What's to be done?" thundered the Hangman, starting from his seat and striking his fist with tremendous violence upon the table: "why, if we were all to hang for it to-morrow morning, Nell Gibson must die to-night!"—and as he glared round with his ferocious eyes upon his companions, he read assent in all their sinister countenances.

"That is to say," observed the Buttoner, "if we can find her: but my idea is that she's cut and run."

"Not she," exclaimed the Hangman, "You don't even know the girl so well as I do. She's not one to bolt like a coward: what she does, she'll stand by. Besides didn't you tell me that Larry spoke of her just as if he hadn't peached at all?"

"Yes," observed the Buttoner, "but that was his gammon. No one could have told him about the fire at the Baronet's

except Nell Gibson: and therefore she put him up to our present plot also."

"I know all that very well," exclaimed the Hangman: "but what I mean is simple enough. There's no doubt that Nell Gibson has peached against us: and it's also clear that Larry has promised not to tell that he had his information from her. This is the reason why he didn't have us all taken up: because Nell Gibson's testimony could alone bring home the fire to three of us and this night's plot to us all. Well then, since it's clear that Larry Sampson has been bound over to secrecy by Nell, she herself will fancy that she can brave it out before us. She is a bold girl—and I'll lay my life that she's neither run away nor even thought of it, but that you will find her at Mother Young's."

"Well, I'll go and see," said the Buttoner. "But if so be she won't come down there, what am I to do?"

"Knock her on the head at once," rejoined the Hangman brutally: "and then cut and run at all risks."

"Wery good," said the Buttoner, and forcing his hat down upon his head with an air of determination, he issued from the dark crib.

CHAPTER XCII.

THE MURDER.

It was now one o'clock in the morning but Mrs. Young's establishment was not one of those where very good hours were kept; and on arriving there, the Buttoner found Nell Gibson and three or four other young women sitting up and drinking brandy together.

The instant the man thus made his appearance, Nell Gibson threw upon him a look of significant inquiry, as much as to ask what had been done and whether the plot had succeeded; for, as the reader will bear in mind, she was in reality very far from being the authoress of the betrayal of that plot to Larry Sampson; and she was therefore totally ignorant of all that had taken place since she left the dark crib three hours previously.

But the Buttoner of course fancied that this look of inquiry was only a pretence on Nell's part in order to avert suspicion from herself, or else defy it with a brazen face: and therefore putting on a good humoured look as if he did not suspect her at all, he beckoned her to come out of the

room. The young woman had not the slightest reason to refuse; on the contrary she was most anxious to learn what had taken place; and supposing that her flash man now summoned her away to converse somewhere else without the danger of being overheard, she unhesitatingly rose from her seat, threw on her bonnet and cloak, and prepared to accompany him.

In the prssage they encountered Mother Franklin, who had evidently been paying her respects to a bottle of strong waters; for she was now reeling about in a horrible state of ebriety. A tipsy woman is at all times a shocking spectacle: but this old hag of nearly ninety, with her bleared eyes now red as if they were raw, her toothless jaws wagging as with a palsy, and her cracked voice giving utterance to mingled imprecations and obscenities was altogether one of the most hideous objects that can possibly be conceived.

"That drunken old witch had a holiday this evening," said Nell Gibson, who, accustomed though she was to behold female depravity at all ages and in all its varied phases, was nevertheless ineffably disgusted at the appearance of Mother Franklin. "Yes, she has had a holiday: and you see she has made the best of it."

"Ah! would you insult me?" yelled forth Mother Franklin, applying a vile epithet to the young woman. "But never mind: I dare say——"

"What is that you are muttering to yourself, you wretch?" exclaimed Nell Gibson turning round towards the old woman with eyes flashing fire.

"You'll know, you'll know soon enough," responded the harridan, still muttering in a scarcely audible tone as she reeled towards the staircase to ascend to her own chamber.

Nell Gibson turned in deep disgust away, and followed the Buttoner from the house.

"Now, what has happened?" she inquired, the moment they were in the street together.

"I mustn't tell yer till we get down to the dark crib," said the Buttoner: "and then you'll know all."

The tone in which he spoke was low, deep, and ominous; and therefore Nell Gibson naturally inferred that the deed had been done and that Larry Sampson was murdered. No misgiving as to anything else entered her mind: and not for a moment could she conceive that the plot had failed and that the most terrible suspicions excited against herself. That the Buttoner would not tell her more nor enter into the

slightest particulars in the secret, seemed but a proper precaution; and the only circumstance that struck her as being at all singular, was that she should be fetched down the dark crib at that hour.

"What am I wanted for, at Bencull's?" she therefore asked, as she and the Buttoner proceeded rapidly towards Jacob's Island.

"Don't ask me a single question now," he replied, in a hurried and even tremulous voice: for vile and criminal as he was, he could not contemplate with utter indifference the murder of that fine young woman who was now leaning on his arm.

They continued their way in silence; and in a few minutes reached the dark crib. Bencull opened the street-door; and the moment Nell Gibson entered the back room, she perceived by the looks of the Hangman, the Mushroom Faker, and the Durrynacker that something was ominously amiss. Turning towards the Buttoner for an explanation, she saw that the expression of his countenance was dogged and sombre as if marked with the iron impress of some stern resolve: and then as her glance, now keen with agumenting terror, travelled to the features of Bencull as he came in last and closed the room-door behind him, she read her doom as it were in the looks of the dreadful man.

But not choosing to anticipate any evil—and indeed utterly unable to conjecture whence it could spring so as to assume an aspect at all menacing towards herself she said in that tone of inquiry which an accomplice adopts when demanding an explanation as a right, "Now will you tell me what has been the result of this night's enterprise?"

"Tis for you to tell us what Larry Sampson gave you for betraying the plot!" exclaimed the Hangman in a voice of thunder, as he turned his ferocious looks full upon the now really dismayed and startled young woman.

"Yes—how much did you get?" demanded Bencull, with equal ferocity of voice and look.

"Whatever may have happened, I did not betray you—I swear that I did not;" said Nell Gibson, now recovering somewhat of her presence of mind, while indignation deepened the colour upon her cheeks to the ruddiest glow.

"I knew she would deny it," said the Hangman, his eyes literally glowing upon her. "Why, you she-devil! Larry Sampson has not only balked us and had the laugh at us, but he also knew that me, Bencull, and the Buttoner was the chaps

that did the business t'other night at the Baronet's——"

"Yes—and he knowed all about Coffin's intending to go and get the great book," added Bencull, with such a concentrated ferocity that his voice sounded like the subdued roar of a wild beast.

"I am innocent of all this!" said Nell Gibson, her presence of mind rapidly failing.

"You lie!" thundered the Hangman. "We are certain that you have betrayed us; who else could have done it? Besides, we know more of your nasty sneaking trick than you fancy——"

"Yes, look here," suddenly cried the Buttoner, producing Nell Gibson's own letter to Sir Douglas Huntingdon—that letter which she had penned at Meg Blowen's, and which her paramour had subsequently obtained from the boy to whom she had entrusted it for delivery.

"Ah!" she ejaculated, becoming pale as death—for she saw that her doom was inevitable: and now, though she tried to speak, the words struck in her throat, and terror subdued all further power of utterance.

"You see she's guilty—there's no doubt of it!" said the Hangman; and suddenly flinging off his coat, he actually tucked up his shirt-sleeves in order more effectually to do the work of death.

At the same instant Bencull threw a silk handkerchief round Nell Gibson's neck: and placing his hand forcibly over her mouth, he prevented her from screaming. The other ruffians, not even excepting the Buttoner, now flew upon her like so many wild beasts upon their prey; and while some held her hands and feet, the other tugged hard at the handkerchief in order to strangle her. She struggled desperately, though in the iron grasp of those strong men: her cloak and bonnet were torn off—and her hair streamed down in wild disorder. Hard, hard did she fight against death: fearful was the convulsive tenacity with which the unfortunate girl clung to life! But gradually those strong spasmodic struggles grew weaker and weaker; and in a few more instants all was over!

The villains might have despatched her move speedily by the pistol, the knife or the bludgeon: but they were afraid of exciting the attention of the neighbours by the report of fire-arms—and they were equally careful of spilling blood, which would leave its traces upon the floor—inasmuch as the attention of Mr. Lawrence

Sampson had now evidently become fixed upon the dark crib.

But the work of murder was effectually done by means of strangulation: and when the appalling deed was accomplished the Buttoner suddenly burst into tears and cried like a child.

"What the devil is the meaning of this blubbing?" demanded the Hangman, with a terrible imprecation.

"It's nothink—on'y a sort of nervous fit that I can't help for the moment," whimpered the Buttoner. "There—take her away—take her away—don't let her stare up at me with those eyes that are fixed and dull as if made of glass!—Take her away, I say!"—and the strong man shuddered from head to foot with hysterical convulsions.

"You two look to him," growled the Hangman, addressing the command to the Mushroom Faker and Bob the Durracker. "Come along, Bencull—you and me must do the rest of the work betwixt us."

"To be sure," responded Bencull, raising the corpse by the legs while Daniel Coffin lifted it by the shoulders. "Now then—come, quick—out of this here door—there—that's right!"

"And the two men emerged into the little gallery behind the house bearing the dead body between them in the manner just described.

"Now let's lower it down gently Ben," said the Hangman, "so as not to make a splash. There's nobody about to see what's going on!"

Nobody to see! Ah—the insensate wretch!—the eye of God was upon him—fixed on that scene of murder; and yet, because there was no candle at any neighbouring window, and because not a human soul was visible either on the opposite side of the ditch or on the bridges, the ruthless murderers fancied that no eye was upon them as they lowered the corpse into the stagnant dyke!

The light of the silver crescent moon shone upon this last act in the terrible drama: and as Bencull and the Hangman thus let down their victim into the slimy grave, there was a moment, as she hung over the wooden parapet ere they let go the handkerchief that they held in their grasp,—a moment, we say, at which the pure luster of the planet of the night fell powerfully upon the countenance of the unfortunate young woman, showing in their distorted ghastliness those features that were so recently full of animations and even beauty! For a moment also did

that moon-light delineate the form that was so finely modelled, but which now hung in the dread abandonment of death!

Terrible indeed was every detail of the tremendous tragedy of this awful night: but in another moment all was over. The corpse was lowered down into its black sepulchre of slime—and the dark muddy waters closed with but a sluggish ripple above it.

CHAPTER XCIII.

THE TOKENS.

We must once more transport our readers to Paris—that peerless city which not only sets the fashion for the fair sex, but also affords the example of revolutionary glory to all the nations that are down-trampled and enslaved.

Three weeks had elapsed since that memorable night on which Julia Owen, under the name of *Laura Linden*, had brought all the artillery of her wiles and intrigues, her witcheries and her blandishments, to bear upon Jocelyn Loftus in the prison-department of the Prefecture of Police.

The reader will recollect that it was an accident which revealed to Jocelyn the identity of the false *Laura Linden* with the depraved though lovely Julia Owen; and that this sudden discovery was followed by earnest remonstrances on the part of the young gentleman and impassioned entreaties on that of the young lady. Indeed, in the enthusiasm to which she worked herself up and with which her maddening desires helped to animate her, Julia, had threatened to commit suicide unless Jocelyn would consent to crown her hopes and minister to her sensual cravings. Then was it that in a tone of mingled remonstrance and despair, he exclaimed, "Oh! you will drive me mad—you will drive me mad!"—to which the infatuated Julia responded with all the fervour of devouring passion, "O Jocelyn, dear Jocelyn—thou knowest that I love thee!" That same instant Louisa Stanley was alike a listener and a spectatress; and the scream which thrilled from her lips penetrated through Jocelyn's brain. By the aid of the lamp he looked through the aperture in the partition-wall; and on recognising his Louisa, a cry of rage and madness burst from him. All in a moment did he understand what must have been the impression produced upon the mind of his well-beloved; and while levelling the

bitterest reproaches against Julia Owen, he fell down insensible.

All these particulars have we thus rapidly recapitulated in order to refresh the memory of the reader. We may now add that when Jocelyn returned to consciousness, he found a physician and a nurse seated by his bedside; and on inquiry he learnt that *for ten days* he had been ill with a delirious fever.

Ten days! and how much might have happened in that time! His Louisa had doubtless renounced him for ever; and thus were his fondest, dearest, brightest hopes destroyed beyond redemption! No—not beyond redemption: for he could explain to Louisa all that had occurred; he could show her how he had been made a victim instead of wilfully becoming a criminal. Yes: but by what means was he to communicate with her?—for he was still a prisoner—still subjected to all the vigours of that seclusion to which he had been consigned from the first moment of his arrest.

He appealed to the physician for leave to send to the post a letter which he wished to write: but the medical man, too independent if not too honest to deceive him with false representations, at once declared that he had no authority in the matter. Jocelyn then sent to demand an interview with the Prefect; and this functionary at once acceded to the young gentleman's request and repaired to his chamber. The physician and nurse withdrew; and when Loftus was alone with the Prefect, he demanded an explanation of what had occurred—how Julia Owen had been his neighbour, and how Miss Louisa Stanley had been brought to the Prefecture? To these queries the Prefect however declined giving an answer: and Jocelyn therefore remained in torturing suspense as to the circumstances which had arisen or the influences that had been exercised in order to place Louisa in a position to form the most erroneous and the most fatal opinion of his fidelity and honour. Finding that the Prefect would not give him any explanations on those heads, Jocelyn asked whether he might be permitted to communicate with his friends. The reply was exactly that which he had anticipated—namely a negative, decisive enough though couched in the most courteous terms. He next demanded how long he was to be retained a prisoner; and thereupon the Prefect addressed him in the following manner;—

"In expectation of your convalescence, and naturally supposing that you would

wish to put a term to your imprisonment, those who at present rule your destinies have prepared this bond, which you must sign; and I am instructed—upon receiving your signature, after you shall have duly perused and considered it—to grant you your freedom."

"My freedom!" ejaculated Loftus, "And immediately too?" he asked, raising himself up in his couch and looking eagerly at the Prefect,

"Yes—this very day if you choose," replied the functionary. "It is now two o'clock in the afternoon," he added consulting his watch; "and there is not the slightest reason wherefore you should not be comfortably installed at one of our gay Parisian hotels ere sunset."

"Oh! but I am so weak—so feeble—so ill," murmured Loftus sinking back upon the pillow.

"Change of air and a sense of freedom will speedily restore you to health," said the Prefect.

"Give me the bond," cried Loftus, stretching out his hand: "let me see what it contains! And yet," he observed, abruptly checking the eagerness of his manner, while a dark cloud fell as suddenly upon his features; "it is useless—I know beforehand it is useless! That bond doubtless stipulates conditions which I cannot in honour fulfil——"

"Then will you remain a captive all your life?" asked the Prefect, significantly.

"Heavens! can such an atrocity be contemplated towards me?" exclaimed Jocelyn, in mingled astonishment and terror.

"You must understand," said the Prefect, "that inasmuch as the individuals whom your conduct has converted into enemies, are possessed of power illimitable, so will their persecution of you be pitiless if you persist in thwarting or interfering with their designs. Believe me, young man, it is a somewhat dangerous thing to obey the impulses of a maudlin chivalry, a sickly sentimentalism, or a false honour——"

"Silence, sir!" exclaimed Loftus, with a mingled dignity and sternness, as the excitement of his soul animated him with the strength to raise himself up once more to a sitting posture in the couch: "you are calumniating all the finest feelings that belong to our nature. Because I have vowed to frustrate the schemes which are in progress to accomplish the ruin of a persecuted and injured Princess—for that

this is the cause of my imprisonment I can of course full well conceive——”

“Let us not bandy words,” interrupted the Prefect. “The means of liberty are within your reach; and at all events there will be no harm in your perusing the bond,” he added drawing a parchment from his pocket.

Loftus took the deed—opened it and endeavoured to read its contents. But only a few hours had elapsed since he had awakened to consciousness from the protracted delirium of fever; and a mist was still upon his eyes—so that he could not concentrate the powers of vision upon minute points. Dropping the document from his hand and sinking back upon the pillow, he said in a bitter tone, “I cannot read it: and even if I could, I am persuaded it would be useless”

“Nevertheless, permit me,” exclaimed the Prefect, “to describe the leading points in the bond.”—then perceiving that Jocelyn offered no objection, he continued to say, “The first stipulation is to the effect that you solemnly and sacredly pledge yourself to bury in oblivion all the information you may ever have received relative to the mission of the Misses Owen and their appointment to situations about the person of her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales. Secondly, you renounce all idea of forming so unequal a match as that which you have contemplated in respect to Miss Louisa Stanley. Thirdly, you resume before the world your proper name, and make due submission to——”

“Enough, enough!” cried Jocelyn Loftus, the flush of indignation appearing upon his countenance, a moment before so pale. “Were your infamous Bastile still in existence, I would sooner be consigned to eternal immurement in one of its living tombs, than assent to the terms contained in that document. And now I can full well understand from what quarter emanate these persecutions. But, O God!” he exclaimed, an expression of sudden agony passing over his countenance as a thought struck him: “grant that poor Louisa fall not into the meshes and toils——”

The remainder of the sentence was lost in a suffocating sob which burst from Jocelyn’s lips: and for two or three minutes he was almost completely unmanned by the violence of his emotions. Weakened and enfeebled as he was by illness, it cannot be wondered if his mind were sympathetically attenuated, and that his feelings should for a space triumph over his habitual fortitude.

“No—it is not a Bastile which you have to dread,” observed the Prefect after a pause; “but if you still continue obstinate——”

“You mean,” interrupted Loftus, bitterly, “if I still continue to spurn proposals alike dishonourable and tyrannical to a degree——”

“Well, we will not dispute as to words,” resumed the Prefect, rising from the seat which he had taken by the young gentleman’s bedside: but perhaps you will understand me when I state that if we have no Bastiles, yet we have madhouses;—and should you persevere in your present course——”

“Enough, enough!” ejaculated Loftus, all his wonted fortitude now returning to his aid. “You may consign me to a lunatic asylum on pretences as base as those which have made me a prisoner at the Prefecture: but all the diabolical tyranny of the mad-doctor, and all the coercion of the strait-waistcoat, and the barred chamber, the iron chains, and the ferocious keeper, will not prove more effective with me than the persuasion of this Excellency the Prefect of Police!”

And as Jocelyn Loftus gave utterance to these words, he surveyed the French functionary with a calm but noble dignity which was more impressive than an angry defiance would have been.

“Then you refuse your signature to this bond?” said the Prefect, moving towards the door.

“I do,” was the firm reply. “And now before you leave me, sir, let me remark that the day will come when you may perhaps repent of your conduct towards one who never injured you. Indeed, if there be a spark of generous feeling in your nature—if you have aught of that chivalry in your soul for which your nation is so justly famed—you must shrink from the unworthy position which you are occupying—namely, that of the despot’s tool! No honourable man would consent to be the gaoler of an innocent person under such circumstances.”

The Prefect of Police made no reply to this language of rebuke and remonstrance uttered with dignity rather than with passion: but waiting until Jocelyn had ceased, his Excellency merely bowed and then quitted the room, to which the physician and the nurse soon afterwards returned.

A week now passed away, thus making up the three weeks which at the commencement of this chapter we stated to have elapsed since the memorable night of Julia

Owen's adventures. During those seven days which thus succeeded the interview with the Prefect, Jocelyn Loftus became pretty well restored to health. But his mind remained a prey to cruel misgivings and incessant anxieties.

That the Marquis of Leveson had interfered in his affairs, he had not the slightest doubt. In the first place, it was the Marquis who had been instrumental in nominating the Owens to their present mission; in the second place he was interested for his own reputation's sake in preventing any exposure of the conspiracy thus in progress against the Princess of Wales; and thirdly, it was perfectly intelligible to Jocelyn wherefore the Marquis sought to prevent his union with an obscure and pertionless girl such as Louisa Stanley. Arguing, therefore, from all these circumstances that Lord Leveson had been busily engaged against him, Jocelyn was fearful that the Marquis might by some means or other have gained the confidence of Louisa; and although the young lover had too sublime a faith in the purity and chastity of the damsel's soul to imagine for an instant that she would lend an ear to any overtures which the veteran debauchee might choose to make, yet knowing full well how unprincipled and unscrupulous was the character of that nobleman, Jocelyn could not help fearing for Louisa as one may tremble for the lamb in the power of the wolf!

Thus did the week following the interview with the Prefect pass unhappily enough for Joceyln Loftus: but still he was determined to endure any amount of persecution and undergo any extent of adversity, rather than submit to the terms dictated by his enemies.

At the end of the week the physician pronounced his patient to be so far recovered as not to require his services any longer. Jocelyn saw that it was of no use to endeavour to interest the medical man in his behalf: for though full of that courtesy which seems innate with every Frenchman, he was nevertheless evidently a mere tool of the Prefect. Loftus therefore contented himself with thanking the physician for his attentions: and the medical man then took his leave.

But the nurse still remained. She was a French-woman of about sixty—taciturn, and reserved, but keen and shrewd, and with that kind of sharp angular countenance which denotes extreme artfulness and duplicity. Hitherto she had never addressed a word to Loftus save in fulfilment of her ministering duties as a nurse; but the

moment the physician had taken his departure she suddenly assumed a look of deep significance, as if encouraging Jocelyn to question her.

"And are your services likewise to cease?" he asked addressing her of course in the French tongue.

"That depends upon you, sir," she immediately answered: "and if you are wise you will send a note to the Prefect desiring that I may be allowed to remain in attendance upon you a few days more. Should he hesitate, you must pretend to suffer a relapse, so that it may become a matter of apparent necessity for me to stay. His Excellency has the utmost faith in me. I have been attached to the establishment for the last twenty years; and he does not think me capable of abusing his confidence."

Jocelyn had listened in mingled amazement and hope to this speech, which the old nurse delivered in a cautious whisper: but after the conduct of the char-woman in becoming the agent of Julia Owen's manœuvres, and considering also those manœuvres themselves, Loftus was resolved not to be hasty in putting faith in anybody belonging to the Prefecture.

"What am I to understand from all that you have just told me?" he inquired, looking her full in the face.

"That I am anxious and able to serve you," she immediately answered, "if you choose to be served by me."

"But to what end?" asked Jocelyn, "and in what manner?"

"I suppose an escape is the end aimed at," she returned; "but as to the plan to be adopted, I know naught of it."

"Tell me what you meant by the way in which you addressed me just now," said Jocelyn, resolved to hear more ere he committed himself in any manner. "For during the past week—indeed, since the delirium left me—you have been for hours alone with me in this room, during the intervals between the doctor's visits; and not once have you spoken a single cheering word, nor thrown aside your chill reserve—far less have you given any indication of anxiety or willingness to obtain my confidence."

"Because," rejoined the nurse, "nothing transpired in your favour outside these walls until to-day."

"And what has happened at length, then?" asked Jocelyn, every nerve and fibre thrilling with uncertainty and suspense.

"When I went out an hour ago, to

procure some jelly for you at the pastry-cook's," said the old nurse, "I was accosted by a gentleman who asked me if I belonged to the Prefecture, as he saw me issue forth from the building with a small market basket hanging to my arm. I answered in the affirmative; and pulling a handful of gold out of his pocket as a sign that he was able and willing to recompense, he besought me to give him a few minutes' private conversation. I told him to follow me to the pastry-cook's; and on arriving there, we went into an inner room, where we sat down to discourse. The gentleman—who, by the bye, I should have said is an Englishman, although he speaks French as well as you do, sir—put twenty pieces of gold into my hand and asked me if I would accept the sum as an earnest of what he was disposed to give if I could and would serve him. To convince you, sir, that I am telling the truth," added the nurse, "here are the twenty pieces that he gave me—all in *guineas*, as I think you call them in your language:—and she displayed the coins as she spoke.

"Well, I certainly see that you have twenty good golden guineas," said Jocelyn his heart beating high with hope notwithstanding his endeavour to put a bridle upon his credulity. "Pray proceed."

"The English gentleman, after a great many questions," continued the nurse: "evidently for the purpose of testing my good faith, came to the point at length by asking me whether I knew any prisoner of your name——"

"What name?" asked our hero.

"*Jocelyn Loftus*," returned the old nurse: for although I know, sir, that it is not your right name, yet I am not aware what your right one really is. The Englishman however of whom I am speaking mentioned you by the name which you bear here; and in reply to his question I told him not only that I knew you, but that I was actually appointed by the Prefect to wait upon you. At these tidings he was perfectly overjoyed; but with a reasonable regard for caution, he would say nothing more unless I took him back from you some token to prove that you believed me to be trustworthy. And that you may be enabled to do this if you choose, I have brought a token from the Englishman.

"Give it to me," exclaimed Loftus, now, utterly unable to subdue or conceal his eagerness: and clutching at a scrap of paper which the old woman handed him, he hastily read the following lines:—

"Clara Stanley has seen her sister Louisa, who is safe. This is a token that

you have friends outside. Send a token to prove that the bearer may be trusted."

A fervid joy now flamed up in Jocelyn's eyes and glowed upon his countenance; for a thousand thrilling ecstatic ideas swept through his brain. Louisa was safe and Clara had seen her since the adventure in Paris. But were the sisters now interesting themselves by means of some trusty agent to effect his liberation? and if so, was it not a proof that his well beloved still cherished his image—was still devoted to him? And if she still clung to his memory and still considered herself his betrothed, was it not an evidence that she no longer believed him unfaithful? and did not appear as if the wheel of fortune had begun to turn in his favour?

Such was the first gush of delicious thoughts that were excited by that scrap of paper: but now came the more serious reflection—was he put faith in this seeming token? or was it the first step in some new intrigue to destroy him?

"Describe to me the person of this Englishman whom you have met," he said, once more resuming a tone of caution and a look of reserve.

"Rather stout—of middle-height and about forty," returned the nurse: "great black whiskers and mustachios—red face and fierce-looking—dressed in a military style—and carries a great stick with a large knob."

"I have not the slightest idea who he is," observed Loftus, thinking that the description was much more suitable to a Frenchman than to an Englishman; and again he hesitated as to the amount of reliance he ought to place upon the old woman's tale.

But still he saw not how the token sent to him could possibly form a link in any chain of contemplated treachery; and much less could he understand how he should be compromising himself by sending some sign in reply. Besides, where nothing was risked, nothing would be gained: and if he indeed had friends outside, it was his duty to acknowledge their good intentions and do all he could to further them. Therefore, without any more hesitation, he at once wrote on the back of the slip of paper the following words:—

"Has Miss Louisa returned to Canterbury? or is she with her sister in Stratton street, London?"

"When are you to meet the Englishman again?" he asked, as he handed the scrap of paper back to the old nurse.

"This evening at seven o'clock" was the response. "But in the meantime, do you

write to the Prefect and solicit that I shall remain in attendance upon you."

Loftus hastened to comply with this suggestion: and in the course of an hour he received a written answer from the Prefect, couched in the following terms:—

Cabinet of the Prefecture of Police,
"November 24th, 1814.

SIR,—I beg to inform you that I have received your note, and in reply thereto have to state that the attentions of the nurse shall be continued towards you so long as you remain a prisoner in the Prefecture. But the medical attendant has this day reported your complete recovery; and I have therefore to inform you that, according to the instructions which I have received, you must prepare for removal to another place in the course of two or three days, unless you assent to those terms which may at once empower me to restore you to liberty.

"I have the honour to salute you,"
"THE PREFECT OF POLICE."

Jocelyn read this note to the old nurse watching her countenance as he did so: but he could not discover in her looks anything to make him suspect that she was playing him false or was privy to any new plot initiated against him. He now therefore anxiously awaited the result of her next interview with the Englishman; and as seven o'clock approached, his excitement rose to the highest degree. At length she took her departure; and after an absence of more than an hour she made her appearance again in the prison-chamber.

"I have seen the Englishman," she said; "and I gave him back the scrap of paper on which you had written something, which evidently satisfied him that I was trust worthy. He thereupon took me in a hackney-coach to a house in the Rue du Bac; and in a handsome apartment on the first floor I was introduced to an elderly gentleman with a great brown wig, red whiskers, and a very good set of teeth. He is also an Englishman. A few words passed between him and the gentleman who had brought me hither: but as they spoke in English I did not understand what they said. I however perceived that the one with the black whiskers and mustachios was called *Captain*."

"I cannot think who they can be," said Jocelyn. "But pray go on."

"The gentleman with the brown wig and whiskers desired me to sit down: and

he then proceeded to put all kinds of questions concerning the Prefecture—its internal arrangements, the distribution of the buildings, the manner in which they are guarded, and the exact position of your chamber. To all these queries," continued the nurse, "I gave the fullest and most faithful particular. Indeed, being well aware for what motive I was thus interrogated, I told the two gentlemen that it would be madness to dream of effecting your escape either by force or stratagem, so long as the Prefecture remained in your prison. Struck by this last observation of mine, they asked what I meant; and I proceeded to explain that this very afternoon you had received a letter from the Prefect intimating that you were shortly to be removed elsewhere. This statement seemed to give a new impulse to the thoughts of your English friends; and after conversing together for a short time in their own language, the Captain penned a few hasty lines which he bade me give you."

With these words the old woman handed Loftus a note, the contents of which he eagerly perused, and which ran as follows:—

"The few words you sent just now have been regarded as a token that the bearer is fully trustworthy. Being unacquainted with your handwriting, it was necessary to receive from you some proof that the little billet was really delivered to you yourself instead of being placed in the hands of your gaolers. The words you wrote back, could not well have been forged by any official of the Prefecture, inasmuch as they involve questions which none but you would have been likely to put: and therefore we received them as a token that the first little missive really reached you. It now appears that you are soon to be removed. You must ascertain, if possible, when this removal will take place, and whither you are going. But if you cannot glean these particulars, you need not despair: we shall maintain a constant watch—as we are pledged to accomplish our aim!

"Miss Louisa Stanley has returned to her residence at Canterbury, having escaped from many perils. We are enabled to assure you that nothing which your enemies have devised or done, has in any way impaired her full confidence in you."

"YOUR FRIENDS OUTSIDE."

The joy—the supreme, ineffable joy—which Loftus experienced on perusing the latter part of the letter, so transcended all the previous satisfaction which he felt at the prospects of escape held out by the

preceding portion, that he for a few minutes forgot everything save the one grand fact that his Louisa loved him as fondly as ever. The assurance thus conveyed seemed to inspire him with a new life: hope lit up its flaming beacon before his eyes—and again did he whisper to himself that the wheel of fortune was turning in his favour.

"But when the first gush of ecstatic feelings had thus found a vent, he was enabled to revert with befitting seriousness and deliberation to the measures that were in progress for his escape. To solicit another interview with the Prefect was the only way to obtain the information which his friends outside requested him to procure—namely, the time fixed for his removal, and the place to which he was to be removed: but as it was now nine o'clock in the evening he considered it best to postpone the demand for that interview with the Prefect until the following morning. Dismissing the nurse therefore for the night, he remained alone to meditate upon his prospects, his hopes, and his love.

After breakfast next morning he was about to pen a note to the Prefect, when the door opened and that functionary entered the room. The old nurse immediately withdrew; and the moment she had retired, the Prefect addressed himself to Jocelyn in the following manner:—

"By this morning's post I have received a letter from London. It is to the effect that from something which has transpired within the last week or ten days, it is deemed expedient no longer to insist upon that clause in the bond which forbids your alliance with Miss Louisa Stanley."

"Ah!" ejaculated Loftus, in astonishment: "what could have transpired to have produced this change of opinion upon that point? Your Excellency can surely speak with more openness and less enigma than heretofore. Indeed, I know full well that the Marquis of Leveson is at the bottom of all this——"

"Well, then," observed the Prefect, hastily, "it does appear from the letter I have received this morning, that his lordship *has* learnt something which has induced him to alter his mind very materially concerning this matrimonial project of your's. But whether it be more highly connected than he had at first supposed—or whether she has suddenly proved the heiress to a fortune—I am of course utterly unable to conjecture. Suffice it for you to know, that this particular clause in the bond is withdrawn; and I will take it upon myself to erase the stipulation which

requires your submission and obedience to the Marquis of Leveson. It now therefore only remains for you to sign your assent to that clause which sacredly and solemnly pledges you to abstain from any interference in the affairs of the Princess of Wales—to bury in oblivion all that you may have ever learnt upon that subject—and to pursue your future career as if no such details had ever come to your knowledge."

"I have listened to your Excellency with varied feelings of interest," said Jocelyn, in a firm and deliberate tone. "That an assent should now be given to my union with Miss Louisa Stanley, is so far agreeable inasmuch as it can only be a tribute of admiration and respect accorded to her beauty and her virtues: for that she has suddenly discovered any high connexions or become possessed of a fortune, I do not for a moment believe. The clause relative to my submission to the Marquis of Leveson could indeed be well dispensed with for reasons which I need not explain. But as for that clause which is to remain and which I am to be called upon to sign—were I to purchase my freedom on such terms, never should I dare venture into the presence of Louisa Stanley again. When first I set out upon this enterprise, she encouraged me to pursue it; and with all the generosity of his nature did she appreciate the duty which circumstances thus imposed upon me. She felt for the injured Princess—not because she is a Princess—but because she is a woman—a wronged and injured woman!—and she would regard me as a coward—a base recreant—were I now, in a moment of weakness or folly, to abandon the cause of that persecuted lady."

The Prefect exerted all his eloquence to remonstrate, persuade, and cajole, in order to induce Jocelyn to sign the bond, now cut down to a single clause: but not even to this one clause would the young man append his name. At length, tired of his unavailing endeavours to alter the prisoner's decision, the Prefect said, "Then if you are bent upon this obstinacy, I have no alternative but to follow out the instructions which I have received"

"And those instructions?" said Loftus, interrogatively.

"To treat you as a lunatic," responded the Prefect, "and remove you to an asylum for the insane. To-morrow night, therefore, at eleven o'clock, will you be transferred hence—unless in the interval you yield to the dictates of reason and prudence."

Having thus spoken, his Excellency

hastened from the room; and soon afterwards the old nurse returned. Jocelyn now penned the following note:—

"TO MY FRIENDS OUTSIDE.—Whoever ye are, accept my sincerest and most heartfelt thanks! Your note duly reached me; and as a farther token that it is really I, the undersigned; who am thus corresponding with you, permit me to ask whether Miss Clara Stanley is still residing with Mr. and Mrs. Beckford in Stratton Street, Piccadilly? The time of my removal is fixed for to-morrow night at eleven: and my destiny is a *mad-house*—but where situated I know not. This point I could not ascertain: nor is there any chance of discovering it. I have not the slightest doubt that the old woman is fully trustworthy.

"JOCELYN LOFTUS."

But scarcely had our hero penned the last words of his note, when the thought suddenly struck him, with the dismaying effect of a lightning flash, that although the nurse brought the notes to him and carried his own to the friends outside, yet that it was quite possible for her to submit the whole correspondence to the Prefect as it passed through her hands. This idea had not struck him before; and his heart now sank within him. He glanced up from the paper on which he had just been writing, and encountered the looks of the woman as they were fixed upon him: but there was nothing troubled in the manner in which she met his gaze. On the contrary, she evidently perceived that some misgiving had suddenly entered his mind; and in a calm unruffled tone, she said, "I cannot convince you, sir, of my fidelity: but after all, what risk do you run by trusting me? If I really am faithful, well and good: but if, on the other hand, I am all the while betraying you to the Prefect, what alteration can it make in the circumstances of your position? You are not like a murderer or a felon on whom heavy irons are put when he attempts to escape."

The truth of these observations forcibly struck Jocelyn Loftus; and even if he were not thoroughly convinced of the old woman's fidelity, he at all events resolved to allow the matter to take its course. But to the note which he had just penned, he added the words—"Nevertheless, use the utmost caution."

The old nurse presently sallied forth with this letter: and in about an hour she returned, bearing a written reply which ran as follows:—

"Your note is received; and in pursuance of your recommendation to *use caution*, we shall not commit any of our plan to paper. Suffice it to say that we are neither inactive nor irresolute. Miss Clara Stanley was residing in Stratton Street when we left London a few days ago.

"YOUR FRIENDS OUTSIDE."

"P. S.—Unless anything of importance should transpire—such, for instance, as the postponement of your removal—it will not be necessary for any farther communication to take place between us. We have given the old woman a hundred guineas.

It can scarcely be necessary to inform our readers that the remainder of this day and the whole of the next passed amidst much anxiety and torturing suspense. At one moment Jocelyn was buoyed up with exulting hope, feeling confident in the success of the plans, whatever they were, which his friends outside were conducting: at another moment his spirits drooped, as a bird plunges down from the loftiest clouds into the lowest abysses of some yawning gulf—and he fancied that he was betrayed! As the hour approached for his removal from the Prefecture, the restlessness of his spirit amounted to a positive excruciation; and he felt the blood coursing at a fever pace in its crimson channels.

CHAPTER XCIV.

THE JOURNEY.

At ten o'clock on the night fixed for Jocelyn's departure, the Prefect visited him, and made a last effort to induce him to sign a bond.

"You," observed his Excellency, "what a fine opinion even your very enemies have of your honour and integrity, since they are wiling to permit you to go at large in the world to the possessor of all their most important secrets, with no other guarantee than a simple written pledge that you will not betray them."

"Yes," said Jocelyn, "but they first attempted to destroy me:—they of virtue and paralyse every sentiment of honour within my breast—forulse of was the aim in subjecting me to this five wives of the temptress Julia. I cannot doubt. But having had so strong a proof that I prefer the approval of a conscience to all the blandishments of transient pleasure, and that I cherish honour as if it were a worship,—my

enemies, as you justly style them, are now willing to trust themselves to that integrity and that sense of rectitude which they have vainly endeavoured to subvert. They know that my pledge would be my bond, and that my written promise would never be falsified. But that pledge and that promise they will not obtain from me!"

These words were uttered in so firm a tone that the Prefect of police offered no farther remonstrance and attempted no more persuasion; but coldly bowing to our young hero, he quitted the room. A few minutes afterwards the old nurse entered to take leave of Jocelyn; and she spoke her farewells with an air of so much sincerity that all remaining suspicions with regard to her were banished from his mind.

A little before eleven Jocelyn was fetched from his room by a couple of gendarmes and conducted down to the court-yard, where a post-chaise and four appeared in readiness. The postillions were ready mounted—the lamps of the vehicle were lighted—and the moment Loftus entered, the door was banged and the equipage rolled at a rapid rate through the gloomy gate of the Prefecture.

Inside the chaise Jocelyn found himself in the companionship of two individuals. One of them he speedily recognised, by the light which the street-lamps shed into the carriage, as the very same police-agent who had arrested him nearly two months back at the Hotel Meurice: the other was unknown to Jocelyn, but was no doubt likewise an official of the Prefecture. Both were in plain clothes; and the first mentioned one immediately addressed our hero in terms of politeness to which a response was given: but it was not till a short time had elapsed that Jocelyn could feel very much inclined to converse familiarly with either of the agents of that tyrannical government being subjected.

On emerging from the quays bordering the Seine, the post-chaise rattling turning into the central avenue of the Champs Elysees took the road for St. Germain. While in the Champs Elysees of the suburbs, there were so many vehicles hurrying in every direction that it was impossible to say whether any particular one was following the post-chaise: but when proceeding farther along the road and the open country was gained, Jocelyn listened anxiously for the sounds of any vehicle in pursuit. For if his English friends were not thus following,

how was it possible that they could accomplish his rescue? Such was the question which he asked himself a dozen times during the first half-hour that elapsed after leaving the Parisian suburbs behind: but no sounds of any vehicle in pursuit reached his ears.

The weather was fine, clear and frosty: the moon sat enthroned in silver splendour amidst the deep blue of the cloudless overarching sky, which was gemmed with myriads of stars, those chaste handmaids of the Queen of Night! The police-agents, finding that Jocelyn did not encourage them in conversation, soon sank into silence: but through the semi-obscurity which prevailed inside the vehicle, our hero, could observe their eyes fixed upon him with the keenness of custodians whom no soothing influence could lull into slumber so long as a watch must be kept.

The journey had now lasted upwards of an hour, when suddenly a man on horse-back coming from behind—that is to say, from the direction of Paris—shot past the post-chaise with incredible speed.

"His horse has run away with him," observed one of the police-agents: and as he put down the window and looked forth, the movement of his body made his coat open somewhat, and Jocelyn observed that he had a pair of pistols secured about his person.

In about a couple of minutes after the horseman had galloped by with the meteor-like rapidity just described, another one, equally well mounted and proceeding at the same desperate rate, swept past the chaise—no sooner appearing than he was instantaneously out of sight.

"Hah! I should think they must be government expresses," observed the police-agent who was looking out at the window: "and yet they did not appear to have on the official uniform."

"It was impossible to tell at the rate they swept past," said the other police-agent. "They must be Government couriers—or else the American Ambassador's expresses bound for Havre."

But scarcely were these words spoken, when a vehicle, built like the tall English phaeton then in vogue—drawn by two splendid horses—and containing three persons, also swept by the chaise in the same direction as the two horsemen, who from their fleetness might be taken for the outriders of that dashing equipage.

"Ah! at what a tremendous rate that vehicle is going," cried the police-agent who still had his head at the window. "I wonder what it can mean? Doubtless some

of your madcap fellow-countrymen, sir," he continued, addressing himself to Loftus: "for your Englishmen are desperate riders and drivers, and can make your horses do anything."

"Those travellers, whoever they may be, are indeed going very quick," said our hero, assuming a tone of most perfect indifference, although a powerful excitement was really agitating in his breast—for a secret voice seemed to whisper that these dashing horsemen and the occupants of the phaeton were the friends whose presence he had been so eagerly expecting upon the road.

Scarcely had he come to this conviction when the chaise entered the town of St. Germain; and there the horses were changed. The halt only occupied two or three minutes; and the vehicle proceeded on at a rapid rate. Half-an-hour elapsed—St. Germain was far behind—and the road now lay through a wood stretching far as the eye could reach on either side till lost in the gloom of distance. The moon still shone in unclouded splendour, shadowing forth the sombre appearance of the landscape; for not a human habitation was now to be seen. A presentiment sprang up in Jocelyn's mind that ere the wood was cleared something would be attempted by his friends; and as he leant back in the seat, the two officers sitting opposite to him, he endeavoured through the obscurity to discover with straining looks, the exact position in which the principal police-agent's pistols were secured at his waist—for our young hero was resolved, if any attack were made, to second as resolutely as he could *inside* the endeavours of his friends *outside*.

Rapidly along the level road—which ran straight as an arrow through the wood—proceeded the equipage. By the shadow which it threw upon the ground, in the powerful moonlight, Jocelyn could perceive that there were no guards or gendarmes seated outside the chaise: the two agents who occupied the interior along with him, were therefore the only persons to contend against—for the postillions were sure not to be armed. Perceiving, therefore, that he was so slightly guarded, he felt assured that the old nurse had not betrayed to the Prefect the proceedings of his friends, and that therefore such an eventuality as an attempt at rescue had never been dreamt of by the authorities.

Scarcely had Jocelyn revolved all these calculations in his own mind, when from the two branches of a cross-road a sudden attack was made upon the equipage. From

the right hand and the left, simultaneously and with matchless energy, was the onslaught made by five determined persons. The postillions were instantaneously knocked from their horses; a foot was then placed on either breast and a pistol pointed at either head, accompanied with stern injunctions to remain quiet, "or their brains would be blown out." One of the postillions was completely stunned by the fall, and with regard to him therefore the warning was unnecessary: but the other was less hurt, and in piteous tones he promised to remain quiet, imploring that his life would be spared.

At the same moment that the postillions were hurled to the ground by two of the assailants, the traces were cut by a third, and the horses at once stood still. Simultaneously also were both the doors of the chaise hastily torn open; and at each door appeared an individual thrusting pistols into the interior.

The sudden movement which the two police agents made to tear open their coats and draw forth the weapons with which they were armed, was instantaneously frustrated by Jocelyn who threw himself with all his force upon them, and thus succeeded in encumbering and restraining their actions for a few moments, while the two individuals who appeared at the doors, aided him in completely overpowering them. To drag them forth into the road—bind them with stout cords—take their weapons from them and toss them to a distance, all this was now the work of a minute: and no sooner was it over when Jocelyn's friends hurried him along with them up one of the branches of the cross-road, where the two saddle-horses and the dashing phaeton appeared.

"Now away, with the speed of the whirlwind!" exclaimed one who seemed to be the leader of the party, and who by the hasty glance which Jocelyn threw upon him in the moonlight, seemed to answer to the old nurse's description of the elderly gentleman with the brown wig and the red whiskers. "Up into the phaeton," he cried, seizing Loftus by the arm and literally thrusting him on to the front seat. "Now, Captain, where are you?"

"Here, my lord," instantaneously responded a stentorian voice; and the individual who thus spoke, sprang at the same time upon the back of one of the saddle-horses: then in a still louder tone he cried, "Robin?"

"Here, sir," was the reply: and the person who now spoke leapt up behind the

phaeton, where another of the band also ensconced himself.

All was haste and bustle, but no confusion. The Captain, he it remembered had mounted one saddle-horse: the other was at the same time bestridden by its owner. The personage in the brown wig, and who had been addressed as "my lord," seized the reins of the phaeton and took his seat as driver—and then the whole cavalcade, consisting of saddle-horses and equipage, sped away at a tremendous rate.

CHAPTER XCV.

EDITHA.

It was on the fifth evening after the incidents just related; and if we peep into the Countess of Curzon's boudoir between eight and nine o'clock, we shall observe her ladyship occupied with the elegant mysteries of the toilette. And yet the word *mysteries* scarcely applies in the present instance: for no need had Editha of cosmetics, sophistications, or adventitious appliances to enhance the natural splendour of her charms.

No succedaneous enamel was required for those pearly teeth that were without spot or blemish and which shone between the lips that were full and red as a lucious fruit of the tropics: no art could shed upon the cheeks the hue of a richer carnation than that which the warm blood itself gave in its mantling glow;—no dye nor factitious confection could crown the dark hair with a brighter glory than its own purple glossiness. And though the complexion of this lady was of oriental duskiness, yet would it have been a very folly and a shame to have endeavoured to mitigate its dark beauty by the appliance of aught whiter or make that skin fairer. For that soft and delicate tint of bronze—the softest and most delicate that can possibly be conceived—gave her the appearance of the warm Andalusian or glowing Italian,—as if she were one of the impassioned daughters of the sunny south!

Her eyes, so dark and yet so full of living lustre, seemed like ebony condensing all the brilliancy of diamonds: as suns they appeared to burn those who gazed upon them—and, as suns also, did they seem as if worlds of bliss and realms of paradise lay concealed in the depths of their glory!

She had chosen for her evening toilette a rich satin dress of a shining amber colour, and which seemed to array her in

the brightness of a robe made of golden tissue. The low body left her polished shoulders entirely bare, and revealed sufficient of the bust to show the sculptural contours of the round, fair, and well-detached bosoms. The naked arms had a graceful curve which admirably became their perfect modelling; and though the skirt of the shining robe was so ample, yet did its plaits and folds afford an external indication of the symmetry which it concealed. Thus the shape of the lower limbs might be conjectured—aye, followed and delineated, by the mind's eye, especially when the imagination was assisted by exquisite conformation of the foot and ankle that peeped from beneath the satin dress.

Pearls set off the purple glossiness of her luxuriant hair—and pearls also marked with their delicate tracery the roundness of her swan-like neck. Nothing could exceed the glowing appearance of the Countess of Curzon in that dark oriental loveliness which made her seem like a *houri* fresh from the sensualities and luxuriousness of Mahomet's paradise. All the brilliance of beauty, the grace of motion, and the seductiveness of look which ever combined to render woman alike charming and dangerous, now mingled all the magic of their spells wherewith to invest the Countess of Curzon.

In the brilliant toilette which Editha had just achieved, she was efficiently assisted by the faithful Gertrude, her principal lady's-maid. This young woman, who was herself exceedingly beautiful, was devotedly attached to her mistress—not merely because she was a confidant in Lady Curzon's intrigues, nor because she was well remunerated for her complicity, but because she really loved the Countess for her own sake, with a rare amount of disinterested affection.

"Your ladyship never appeared more beautiful than you are to-night," said Gertrude, as she threw a rich ermine cloak over the shoulders of her mistress.

"I am glad you tell me so, my dear girl," replied Editha, laughing gaily; "for I know that you are impartial. And now remember what I have told you—"

"Your ladyship knows," said Gertrude, with a meaning look, "that I always attend to your lordship's commands."

"You do, my dear girl," observed the Countess, tapping her carressingly on the cheek, "and you are aware that there is nothing I will not do to serve you in return. Whenever you find a husband that will suit you," added Editha with a

gay smile, I shall take care of your dowry."

"Oh! there is time enough to think of that," exclaimed Gertrude. "I do not wish to quit your ladyship's service even to be married——"

"But you must not lend a willing ear to the idle flatteries of men," said Editha. "Wait till you are married, Gertrude, and then you can do anything—gratifying every phantasy and yielding to every whim. But in the meantime, prudence should lead you to be what the world calls virtuous. At all events," she added, with a gay laugh and with a look singularly full of wickedness and arch significance, "do not yield to the honied words of my husband."

"Oh! was not that farce an amusing one?" cried Gertrude, bursting into a peal of the merriest laughter, while her own looks also expressed a roughish meaning. "It was better than any play at a theatre: such equivoques! But when will his lordship return home?"

"I do not know exactly," responded Editha. "In a few days, I presume. He told me that he was going to France on some sudden and pressing business. Whether it be true or not, I cannot say. But 'tis now nine o'clock, and I must be off to Lady Lechmere's."

The Countess thereupon issued forth from her boudoir, and descended the stairs with the splendid ermine cloak flowing loosely around her. When at the bottom of the staircase she looked up; and perceiving that Gertrude was leaning over the ballusters of the landing above, Editha gave the abigail a parting look of deep meaning, which was responded to by one of equally vivid intelligence. Lady Curzon then entered the carriage, and was driven to Lady Lechmere's abode in North Audley Street.

The brilliant saloons of this mansion were already crowded when Editha made her appearance: but amongst all the blaze of beauty and fashion there assembled, no female scion of the aristocracy was more remarkable for the loveliness of her person and the elegance of her attire than Lady Curzon. Immediately on entering, she was surrounded by a host of admirers: and assuredly that was a moment of proud triumph for the charming patrician lady, to perceive that many rivals were deserted by their fickle gallants, who now hastened to pay their homage to herself.

Lady Lechmere was a widow on the shady side of forty: and notwithstanding the disparity of their years, Lady Curzon

being only six-and-twenty, the closest friendship existed between them.

Amongst the brilliant company thus assembled at lady Lechmere's, perhaps the only one of the male sex, who could not boast of being descended either from some Norman cut-throat Baron, or from some vile harlot of the reign of Charles II,—and who could not produce a genealogical tree containing a thousand names, or a coat of arms interwoven with the mosaic work of endless quartering,—the only man, in fact, who had no *prestige* of high birth, lofty rank, and proud title to recommend him to the notice of the fashionable world, was Mr. Emmerson, the bill-broker of Nicholas Lane, Lombard Street. It was true, that if he possessed an office in the dingy regions of the City, he likewise owned a splendid house at Clapham; and that if he had no aristocratic title to embellish his name, at all events he had the reputation of enjoying an immense fortune. Nevertheless, these circumstances would not have sufficed as an introduction into the exclusive circles of the West End, had not some other influence been exercised in order to throw open the gilded portals of fashion to admit him with the sphere of that roseate scene of luxury.

What, then, had proved the talisman to open those doors to the bill-broker of Nicholas Lane?—What was the mysterious *sesame* which had produced this magic effect? It was to the Countess of Curzon that Emmerson was indebted for the extraordinary privilege which he thus enjoyed. In plain terms, Editha had become his mistress!

Possessed of the forged bills, Emmerson had experienced but little trouble in coercing her; and when once she had abandoned herself to him in order to regain possession of those documents, she found that he was prepared to behave towards her with the utmost munificence. Steeped in debt—extravagant to a degree—having a thousand wants and no means of gratifying them, inasmuch as her tradesman refused further credit, and she could obtain but little money from her husband, Lady Curzon eagerly availed herself of the proposals made by her City friend; and in return for the gold with which he profusely supplied her, she rewarded him as liberally with her favours. But to avert suspicion and avoid the chance of scandals, Editha had not herself been the direct means of introducing the bill-broker into fashionable circles. Lady Lechmere, who was privy to her friend's intrigue, had

cheerfully undertaken this task. Accordingly, Emmerson had first appeared as the guest of Lady Lechmere; and therefore the supposition was, that in this capacity had he been introduced to Lady Curzon, and thus formed her acquaintance.

The reader has already seen that Emmerson was a veritable money-grubber—stern and implacable in his financial dealings—intensely selfish, unprincipled and hollow-hearted. But he had become completely infatuated with Lady Curzon. Not only did her extraordinary beauty and her glowing temperament exercise a magic influence over a man of strong sensuality and licentious ardour: but his vanity was also supremely flattered in possessing so aristocratic a mistress. When he beheld that woman of dazzling beauty, elegant manners, and brilliant accomplishments, enter the ball-room in all the glory, pride, and effulgence of her rank and her loveliness, he felt that it was worth any sacrifice to be enabled to say to himself, "That woman—the cynosure of all admiration—the centre of all regards—the object of all devotion—that woman is mine!" Then, on accosting her and being received with a smile, all the sweetness of which was not allowed to appear in the presence of observers, but was shed upon him as it were in the furtiveness of a rapid sidelong look,—to feel that while men of the proudest titles and loftiest rank, were gazing with admiration, passion, and desire upon that lady of warm and glowing beauty,—to feel, we say, that he, the mere citizen, without birth or aristocratic halo, was the master of all those charms,—this was indeed flattering to the pride of a vain, conceited, self-sufficient, and to some extent weak-minded person, such as Emmerson.

But he had the good sense not to accost her the moment she entered the room—not to obtrude himself upon her, nor pointedly thrust himself amidst the aristocratic circle of gallants by whom she was immediately surrounded: much less did he attempt to elbow away any one who for a moment might appear to be enacting the part of rivalry. With consummate duplicity Editha had made him believe that she really loved him, and that it was not his gold which purchased her favours, but that he himself was the object of her disinterested affection. Strong, therefore, in the conceit with which she had thus imbued him, and to which his infatuation rendered him so easily accessible, he exhibited no jealousy when he saw her smiling upon others who were really handsome and possessed of

qualifications calculated to win a woman's heart. Quietly biding his time as it were he waited until the first dazzling effects of her presence had passed away, and when the evening was somewhat more advanced and her admirers began to flit about elsewhere; then was it that Mr. Emmerson availed himself of the opportunity to approach Editha, and take a seat by her side.

For a short time they conversed together upon indifferent topics: but presently Lady Curzon rose, saying with a smile, "Give me your arm, and let us visit the card-room for a few minutes."

Thither they accordingly proceeded: it was not however, to gaze upon the card-players, nor to observe what was going on in this room that Lady Curzon had desired to be conducted thither; but it was because there were comparatively few persons in this apartment and therefore it was more easy to converse without restraint. Accordingly, seating themselves on a sofa at a distance from the card-players, the aristocratic lady and her citizen paramour began to discourse in a confidential manner.

"You are truly beautiful to-night, Editha," said Emmerson, gazing with unfeigned rapture upon the charming creature who affected to love him.

"And you also appear to great advantage," she replied, although in reality his sallow complexion, hard features, and looks denoting the driver of close bargains, filled her with a disgust which only a consummate duplicity enabled her to conceal.

"And is it possible," he said, drinking intoxication from her glance—"is it possible that *you*—the courted, the caressed, and the brilliant idol of fashion—really love *me*, the unpretending, unassuming man of business?"

"You know that I love you," she answered, fixing upon him a look that seemed full of passion, while her magnificent eyes vibrated like stars. "Have I not shown you that I love you? do I not incur constant risks in order that I may lavish upon you the proofs of my affection?"

"Yes, yes," murmured Emmerson his head losing itself in the ebriety of his feelings. "But will you always love me thus?"

"Do you doubt it?" she asked, her looks assuming an expression of mournful reproach.

"But did you not love your husband when you first married him?—then did you not love Colonel Malpas?" asked Emmerson softly.

"Oh! mention not the name of that vile wretch!" exclaimed Editha the glow

of indignation suffusing her spendid countenance and dyeing even her neck and bosom with its mantling vividness. "But yes—we will speak of him for one moment," she observed, checking her wrathful feelings as a sentiment of curiosity suddenly inspired her; "and that is in order that I may ask what has become of him?"

"He is still an inmate of the King's Bench," answered Emmerson. "He has made two or three endeavours to release himself by what is called bail: but the securities proposed have never been accepted by the judge—and therefore he still lingers in prison."

"Where I hope you intend to keep him as long as you can," said Lady Curzon, with the evident bitterness of a deeply cherished vengeance.

"Depend upon it Editha, I will keep him there as long as I am able," returned Emmerson. "Indeed, were he my own brother or father, if he had given offence to you, he should be punished with all possible severity."

"You seem never wearied of giving me proofs of your affection," said Lady Curzon. "And yet I am always taking advantage of your kindness—your goodness towards me. Indeed, this very night have I a favour to ask——"

"Name it, name it, dear Editha," said the infatuated Emmerson: "tell me what I can do to prove my devotion."

"Most humiliating and distressing for me is it to speak on money matters," said Lady Curzon, affecting to be overwhelmed with confusion; but you know how I am situated——"

"Say not another word," interrupted the bill-broker. "But may I not have the pleasure—the ineffable pleasure—of writing you a cheque this very night for what you may require, so that your faithful Gertrude may procure you the amount at my banker's the first thing in the morning? Will you not, I ask, afford me that opportunity?" he urged with a look of deep meaning and in a tone of impassioned entreaty.

"Ah! can you not imagine that I have already made the necessary arrangements?" said Editha, with downcast eyes and blushing cheeks, while she played archly and coquettishly with her fan.

"Yes—I dared to anticipate this happiness—this renewed experience of paradise!" returned Emmerson: "and therefore I am not expected home at Clapham to-night."

"Gertrude will come hither at midnight," said Editha, with a look of intelligence: "half-an-hour afterwards you must be at the corner of the street with a hackney-coach."

Emmerson threw upon his charming mistress a look of intoxicated delight: and they then quitted the card-room, returning to the more spacious saloons where the dancing was in progress. Here they separated for the present,—Emmerson joining a group of gentlemen, with whom he was well acquainted, inasmuch as their promissory notes were all in his strong box in Nicholas Lane,—while, on the other hand, the Countess of Curzon accepted an invitation from some nobleman to join the dance.

A little after midnight Editha watched an opportunity to steal away, unperceived, from the brilliant throng in the splendid saloons: and ascending a staircase, she threaded a long carpetted passage with the air of one to whom the place was quite familiar. Opening a door at the end of this passage, she entered a bed-chamber where a cheerful fire was blazing in the grate, and wax-tapers were already lighted upon the table. Her own ermine cloak was likewise there, lying upon the bed.

Carefully locking the door by which she had entered, Editha opened another one exactly facing it. This second door communicated with a back staircase, feebly lighted by a suspended lamp. For a few minutes the Countess remained standing at the head of this staircase, as if in expectation of some arrival. Such was the case. A small bell was heard to tinkle: and at the signal—for a signal it assuredly was—Editha hastily descended the staircase and unlocked a door at the bottom. This door opened into a bye street; and a female figure, muffled in an ample cloak and wearing a thick black veil, at once crossed the threshold.

The door was closed and locked again; and Editha, followed by the muffled figure, hastened up into the bed-chamber. The new-comer now threw off her bonnet, veil, and cloak, and revealed the bewitching person of Miss Gertrude, the lady's-maid.

A somewhat singular scene now took place: for on the one hand, Lady Curzon began to put off her magnificent apparel; while on the other hand Gertrude likewise proceeded to undress herself. Had any concealed observer been nigh, and in a position to peep at all that was going on, he could not fail to have noticed that the lady and the lady's maid were exactly of the same height, but that the figure and

bust of Gertrude were the least thing fuller and more swelling than the lighter symmetry of her mistress. Nevertheless, the garments of the one would fit the other—as was indeed very soon shown on the present occasion: for while Editha assumed the modest apparel of her dependant, the latter proceeded to deck herself in the brilliant vesture of the Countess. Even to the very pearls and other ornaments did Gertrude take as it were the place of her mistress; and during the exchange of garments a great deal of roguish laughter and a great many sly looks passed between the lady and the lady's maid.

At length, when these mysterious toilettes were completed, Editha assisted Gertrude to envelope herself in the splendid ermine cloak, the hood of which the girl drew so completely over her countenance as most effectually to shade it. She then issued from the chamber—not by the private door and back staircase by which she had entered but by the other door opening upon the long carpetted passage.

Thus apparelled in the shining amber-coloured robe and enveloped in the splendid ermine cloak, with a stray curl or two of her own beautiful jetty hair peeping forth from beneath the hood, Gertrude might well indeed have been taken for the Countess of Curzon. To enact this part was all the more easy, inasmuch as that particular period the cloak-hoods were entirely the fashion for ladies, on issuing forth from balls, parties, theatres, &c; and like the Spanish mantillas or the Turkish veils they were used so completely to conceal the countenance as to afford no mean auxiliary to the intrigues of gallantry.

Lady Lechmere, who was deep in all the secrets of her friend Editha, was waiting on the first landing for the appearance of the disguised Gertrude; and making a signal to a servant who stood in the hall below, the cry of "Lady Curzon's carriage!" was immediately sent forth into the street.

"Now, my dear Countess," said Lady Lechmere, as she accompanied the disguised Gertrude down the stairs, and thence through the hall as far as the very threshold of the mansion—"you do well to wrap yourself up in this manner: the night is bitterly cold—and coming out of hot rooms, it is enough to give you your death, susceptible of the chill as you are. Good night, my dear Countess," she exclaimed more loudly still.

And Gertrude, enacting the part of the said Countess, shook Lady Lechmere by the hand with every appearance of the

most friendly cordiality: then tripping lightly into the carriage, she was whirled away to Grosvenor Street.

In the meantime the real Countess of Curzon, completely—disguised in Gertrude's apparel—wearing the ample cloak and the thick veil of that complaisant lady's-maid—descended the private staircase, and emerged by the side-door into the bye-street, at the corner of which Mr. Emerson was waiting with a hackney-coach. Into the vehicle they got, and were driven as far as Oxford Street, where they alighted; and thence they proceeded on foot to Mr. Gale's fashionable house of infamy in Soho Square.

CHAPTER XCVI.

THE LADY'S-MAID.

The carriage in which Gertrude was seated, arrived in a few minutes at Curzon House, Grosvenor Street. The watchful hall-porter, on the alert for his noble mistress's return, immediately opened the front door, and Gertrude, with the cloak-hood drawn over her countenance, issued from the carriage ascended the stone steps in front of the mansion, and was passing rapidly through the hall towards the staircase, when the hall-porter said, "Please your ladyship, my lord has come back."

If death were really a phantom that appeared to those whom it was about to bear away from the realms of earth, then not even the presence of the grim destroyer suddenly starting up before the young lady's-maid, would have caused her so mortal a terror as this announcement which the porter made. It struck upon her brain like the blow of a hammer—pierced her heart with the pang of a fiery arrow—and then the next moment sent an ice-chill quivering through her entire frame. Her feet suddenly appeared to become heavy as lead, and refused to perform their office. As one who in a nightmare seeks to fly from some hideous object, but fancies that he has not the power to drag his limbs along, so was it with Gertrude. But still, while thus transfixed to the spot, and leaning against the hall-table to prevent herself from falling, she tenaciously kept the ermine hood closed over her countenance.

The hall-porter, being overcome with drowsiness, had hurried away into the side-room where he slept: and thus he did not observe that his announcement of the

Earl's return had produced any extraordinary effect upon her whom he of course believed to be the Countess herself.

But the Earl, who had heard the carriage stop and the front door open, now issued forth from the dining-room where he had been sitting; and the sudden appearance of the nobleman startled Gertrude into new life, and not only relieved her feet from the leaden sensation that had paralysed their power, but gave to them the fleetest wings.

"Well, Editha," said the Earl, as he issued from the dining-room: "not a word of welcome?—not a syllable of any kind? Not even a look of recognition."

But his lordship suddenly stopped short in mingled astonishment and dismay: for Gertrude flew rather than walked towards the stairs, up which she bounded with such a marvellous agility that she was out of sight in a moment.

"Perdition!" exclaimed the Earl of Curzon, a whole hurricane of suspicions sweeping through his brain: and away in pursuit of the fugitive did he rush.

As he was half-way up the stairs he heard a door closed violently and locked as suddenly up above. Conjecturing that it was the door of his wife's boudoir, he hastened thither—and, as he expected, found it fast.

"Editha, open this door—I insist upon it!" he said, with his lips at the keyhole so as to speak only in a whisper that might not be overheard by any of the other members of the household.

No answer was returned—and the Earl spoke not only louder, but in a more menacing tone. Still there was no response. The Earl's suspicions became a thousand times more poignant though not more definite: at all events he could conjecture nothing but that there must have been a lover concealed in his wife's boudoir, and that in a sudden panic-terror she had rushed up to screen him. He accordingly threatened to force the door unless it were immediately unlocked.

Gertrude half-wild with alarm, saw that another moment's delay would produce a fearful scandal throughout the house: and she therefore unlocked the door. She had thrown off the ermine cloak, but still remained in the ball costume. Pale as death—her half-exposed bosom heaving convulsively, and her hands joined in entreaty—she fell upon her knees as the Earl entered the boudoir.

"Heavens! what is the meaning of this?" he exclaimed, as he at once recognised the beautiful lady's maid.

But Gertrude could give no response! the truth she dared not tell—and no falsehood came ready-made to her lips in that moment of indescribable terror. Speechless therefore did she remain, but gazing up at her astounded and bewildered master with so frightened and deprecating a regard that it showed she expected little mercy at his hands.

The Earl of Curzon closed the door of the boudoir, and leaning back against it, gazed down in speechless astonishment upon the kneeling girl. There she was—clad in the splendid raiment of her mistress and with Editha's pearls, too, on her hair and round her neck! Yes—and she had returned home wruffled up in Editha's own ermine cloak! But it was impossible that she could have personated the Countess at Lady Lechmere's grand entertainment: she must have assumed that dress *after* her mistress had figured in it at the ball, and she must have come home thus disguised in the carriage in order to afford Editha an opportunity of remaining out elsewhere!

Such were the Earl's reflections. Yes—he saw it all: the manœuvre was palpable enough! And now, too, did a cloud of recollections gush in unto his mind, and a light simultaneously broke upon them, clearing up all that was mysterious therein before. The incidents of *that night* when for the *first* time he suspected his wife's fidelity, all sprang up as vividly to his mind's eye as if they were just being enacted over again!

And what were the incidents of that memorable night? Be it remembered that on the occasion to which we must thus retrospect, the Earl of Curzon had entered a hackney-coach and planted himself immediately opposite his own mansion, in order to watch Editha's movements, and that he saw a female figure cloaked and veiled, enter the private carriage, and drive away. In the hackney-coach he had followed the carriage to Lady Lechmere's and had seen the veiled figure enter her ladyship's mansion. Then he was satisfied that it was his wife whom he had been watching. It must next be remembered that on returning home on foot, he had encountered another veiled and cloaked figure, whom he had fancied to be Gertrude; and when he endeavoured to engage her in conversation and make love to her, she at first mutely rejected his overtures and then screamed out.

These were the incidents over which the Earl retrospected; and he was now convinced that on that occasion there had

been an exchange of apparel, and that it was really *Gertrude* whom he had seen proceed in the carriage to Lady Lechmere's, and his own *Countess* whom he had importuned with his overtures in the street!

That such had indeed been the case he was now the more convinced, on calling to mind certain other little incidents that had occurred on the same evening. And what were they? First, he had thought to meet his wife in the hall when the carriage came back; but she whom he then took to be his wife, had flitted past him, rushed up-stairs, and disappeared from his view. Almost immediately after, he recollected he had seen *her whom he took for Gertrude* hastening up the stairs and overtaking her he had again addressed some words to her—but she had broken away and bounded up the stairs. This second equivocal, as it then happened, and as he now read it, appeared entirely confirmatory of the fact that the lady and the lady's maid had changed apparel on the memorable evening alluded to, and that he had in reality taken *Gertrude* for his wife and his wife for *Gertrude*!

"All these recollections and the construction which he now put upon the incidents themselves, were the subject of not more than a few moment's reflection, though we have taken several minutes to recapitulate the circumstances and make the explanation apparent to the reader. To the Earl it was speedily clear as daylight: he saw it all—understood it all; for the complete clue to those incidents of the *past* was now afforded by the startling exposure of the intrigues of the *present*.

Gertrude, who was kneeling at his feet, had no difficulty in understanding from the varied though rapid expression which swept over his countenance, what was passing in his mind: and now the keen sense of all the tremendous dangers, which threatened her mistress, inspired the girl who neither lacked heroism nor artfulness, with a resolution to save her if possible.

"Oh! my lord," she exclaimed, rising from her knees, but still maintaining her hands clasped; "forgive me—pardon me—if I have dared to assume a dress belonging to her ladyship! I know that it was very wrong—most arrogant and presumptuous on my part——"

"Ah! Miss *Gertrude*," interrupted the Earl, with a bitter irony in his accents; "the artifice is ingenious, but it will not succeed. 'Tis true that you might have borrowed the Countess's dress: but how came the Countess's carriage to bring you home from Lady Lechmere's?"

Thus speaking, with a voice and look showing that he was not to be deceived he pushed hastily by the discomfited girl, and seized upon *Editha's* writing-desk which stood upon a table. On the former occasion when he had searched that desk, he it remembered, one of his own keys fitted it; and he now therefore had no difficulty in opening the desk again.

"Her ladyship is lost," thought *Gertrude* within herself, as in cruel alarm she contemplated the Earl's proceeding: for the abigail was pretty well assured that the desk would furnish proofs of her ladyship's amours. Resolved to save the Countess, however, at any risk, and indeed at any sacrifice if it were possible, *Gertrude* advanced up to the table, and seizing her noble master's hand, she said in a low deep tone, "I conjure your lordship not to consummate this outrage against your innocent wife, nor give way to any suspicions which my folly and indiscretion may have excited!"

The Earl was too much tortured by the pangs of jealousy to experience any flaming up of a sensual passion, through the contact of that soft warm hand which was thus purposely placed in contact with his own: but looking up, he met the earnest and imploring gaze which the pretty abigail's dark eyes fixed upon him. Then suddenly recollecting that on the former occasion of his suspicions being awakened against his wife, he had resolved to win over *Gertrude* to his interest if possible—and therefore seizing the present opportunity,—he suddenly took both her hands in his own, and assuming a tender look, said, "My dear girl, you are deep in the confidence of your mistress: tell me everything, and I swear that I will always be your friend. I will never desert you—I will place you in a comfortable position, and will bestow upon you as much of my love as it is in my nature to experience or be able to give."

Thus speaking, he drew *Gertrude* towards him and passed his arm around her waist. The young woman not only suffered herself to be thus treated with a tenderness that might not probably stop there, but actually encouraged him to take farther advantage of the opportunity, the circumstances, and the hour: for she pressed closer to him, gazing up into his countenance with looks that at first only stimulated an amorous feeling but speedily began to swim with the wanton languor of really nascent desires. Indeed, when first she placed her hand in contact with that of the Earl, it was as a provocative to his

passions—the execution of a sudden resolve to throw herself in as a means of diverting his attention from the pursuit on which it was fixed, and thus by her own sacrifice endeavour to save the Countess. At the same time, it must be confessed that Gertrude's sense of virtue, was not very strong, inasmuch as she could so readily make up her mind to immolate her own honour in the hope of screening that of her mistress.

"Well, what reply do you mean to give me?" asked the nobleman, now pressing his lips to her's. "Will you transfer your devotion from the Countess to me? Will you, in fact, give me your love and become worthy of mine? Tell me, Gertrude—what am I to expect from you?—what will you do?"

"My lord, my lord," she murmured, now seeking as it were to nestle in his bosom, "I have nothing to reveal that could in any way compromise her ladyship. But come—let us leave that boudoir—and if you wish, I will accompany you to your own room——"

"Ah! Gertrude," exclaimed the Earl of Curzon, who at any other time would have been worked up to a frenzy of desire by the contact of those voluptuous charms and by the provocative looks of the young girl who seemed ready to abandon her virgin innocence to his embrace: but other and fiercer fires were now consuming him—and the temptations of the siren wanton were ineffectual upon a heart scorching with the hell of its unappeasable jealousies. "Ah! Gertrude," he exclaimed, extricating himself from the half-embrace in which she had enfolded him,—“you are in league with your mistress—too much so, I fear to enable you to devote yourself to me!”

"Oh! my lord," she exclaimed, as the tears of mingled vexation and wounded pride rolled down her cheeks, "I thought that you did care for me a little: but now I perceive that you only sought to trifle with me——"

"Ah! I am afraid that 'tis I who have been trifled with," exclaimed the Earl bitterly: and at the same time he began dragging forth the contents of Editha's writing-desk.

Gertrude saw that farther remonstrance and artifice were unavailing; and smarting under a deep sense of humiliation at the rejection of the overtures which she had so pointedly made, she stood by in sullen silence. Not only was she vexed at the failure of her artifice; but her natural woman's pride was hurt and wounded.

"Here!" suddenly exclaimed the Earl after turning over a number of letters of no particular consequence, but at length, lighting upon that very self-same one which had aroused his suspicions on the former occasion;—"here!" he cried, tossing it to Gertrude—"take and read this, and then persist in telling me, if you dare, that you are not in the confidence of your mistress."

The girl took the note which was thus angrily and contemptuously flung at her, and read its contents as follow:—

"I have received your hasty note, my dear Editha, and send you a reply by Gertrude. Yes—I will be at home all the evening, and will adopt the usual precautions. You have nothing to fear on that account. The servant shall receive orders to admit no one but the Countess of Curzon. But are you certain that you can trust the girl?"

"Your affectionate friend,
"KATHERINE LECHMERE."

Eagerly and intently did the Earl of Curzon watch the countenance of Gertrude as she perused that billet; and the girl felt the tell-tale blush stealing over her countenance—a blush which, were it to seal her doom, she had not the power to restrain. Besides, she was hurt at the moment at the doubt implied in the note relative to her own trustworthiness: but a second thought showed her that the Countess was not blameable for what Lady Lechmere wrote.

"Now, young woman, will you confess?" said the Earl, as he took back the note from her hand: "or will you dare my vengeance by your obstinacy?"

I know nothing about it, my lord—I know nothing about it! You may kill me," she added, with hysterical vehemence; "but I shall confess nothing, because there is nothing to confess."

"We shall see," muttered the Earl, with concentrated passion: and he continued his examination of the contents of the writing-desk.

One after another he glanced at the papers and tossed them aside; but presently he drew forth an envelope addressed to the Countess in a bold mercantile hand and with the word "Private" in the corner.

Hastily opening this packet, the Earl discovered that it contained several bills of exchange, the acceptances of which at first struck him to be his own: but perceiving that they were drawn by Percy

Malpas, he instantaneously knew that he had never put his name to such securities at all in favour of the Colonel. A closer examination showed him that the acceptance, written in his own name, was a forgery; and on looking at the back he perceived the endorsement of Emmerson. Ten thousand demons now appeared to be tearing at the Earl's heart, while vulture-talons were fastening upon his brain, as some portion of the truth became revealed to his comprehension. For he saw—he understood—he comprehended but too well that it was his wife who had forged his name to those bills, and the forgery had been perpetrated in favour of Colonel Malpas: then what else could he surmise but that the Colonel had been Editha's paramour?

Poor Gertrude now indeed felt more than ever convinced that her beloved mistress was lost without redemption. She knew of those bills—knew that Emmerson had sent them back—recalled that the packet had been delivered one day to the Countess when seated in the boudoir with two or three lady-friends—and remembered also that Editha had hurriedly consigned that packet to her desk at the moment, with the intention of destroying its contents when alone. But the oversight on Editha's part in neglecting to do so, now threatened to prove fatal indeed, and the poor girl, as all these thoughts swept through her brain, trembled to the deepest confines of her whole being.

The Earl of Curzon had become ghastly pale,—so that his naturally handsome countenance was now almost hideous to gaze upon while the sinister light that shone in his eyes bespoke terrible plans of vengeance already revolving in his mind. Flinging a fearfully sardonic look upon Gertrude, but without breathing a word, he secured Lady Lechmere's note and the packet of forged bills about his person; and finding no other document of any consequence in the writing-desk he tossed back the various letters and papers which he had disturbed, but without giving himself the trouble to re-lock the desk. There was now no necessity to attempt any concealment as to the search which he had instituted!

But he did not immediately leave the room: he appeared to hesitate what course to pursue. He looked at Gertrude—not with the gaze of desire—no heart had he at this moment for tender thoughts or sensual pursuits: his outraged honour

and his wife's crimes were the all-engrossing subject of his thoughts—the all-powerful influence that enchained his heart's keenest emotions! But he fixed his eyes upon Gertrude for a few moments, to ascertain whether there were any signs of contrition about her—whether, in a word there was any chance of her turning against her mistress. But though her countenance was also pale as his own, it nevertheless expressed naught save moody sullenness, mingled with an expression of hatred,—as if on the one hand she knew the case was desperate so far as her mistress was concerned, but that on the other she lodged to wreak her vengeance upon the Earl himself for having discovered his wife's perfidy.

The nobleman was too proud to reiterate his proposals to a girl who gave him no encouragement to do so; and he was about to quit the boudoir, when he suddenly recollected that Gertrude might steal out of the house and warn Editha of what was in store for her—thereby preparing her to meet a storm which the Earl was desirous should burst with overwhelming suddenness upon her head. Accordingly, throwing another significant glance upon the abigail, he said with a cold irony, "Since you are so fond of personating your mistress with regard to her dress, Gertrude, you may now occupy her place in this boudoir till the morning: for I suppose that she purposes to remain abroad all night." Having thus spoken, the Earl of Curzon stalked out of the room, locking the door and taking the key with him.

CHAPTER XXVII.

INTREPIDITY.

When thus left alone, Gertrude stood gazing in dull vacancy for some moments upon the writing-desk which had furnished the proofs of Editha's criminality. Slowly awakening from this stupor of mingled dream and dismay, the abigail began to lay aside the splendid apparel in which she was decorated. Depositing the pearls and the ornaments upon the toilette-table, she put off the amber coloured robe, and then negligently and irresolutely began to comb out her long dark hair.

But it was evident that she was revolving some idea in her mind, and that whether she should retire to rest or carry out this idea constituted the indecision in which she was hovering. Laying down

the comb, she seated herself upon a sofa; and supporting her well-shaped head upon her really beautiful hands, she began seriously to deliberate upon the risks and chances of the project which every moment was becoming more firmly settled in her mind. Her naturally mischievous eyes were now full of a serious expression, —while her cherry lips became compressed with the firmness which is characteristic of a heroine. It was evident that she was revolving some desperate or dangerous scheme: and indeed, if she were just now over ready to yield up her honour in the hope of diverting the Earl's attention from the proceedings of the Countess, she was now as devotedly resolving to risk her life in order to serve that mistress whom she loved so well!

Suddenly starting from her recumbent posture and from her deep reverie, she glanced towards the time-piece which stood upon the mantle: but that clock had stopped, and she knew not what hour it was. But calculating that it was about one o'clock when she had returned from Lady Leshmere's—that the scene with the Earl had occupied half-an-hour—and that a similar interval had elapsed since his departure from the room, she argued that it must now be two o'clock in the morning. Her calculation as to the time was by means a trivial thing, even in the midst of the important considerations that were crowding through her mind. The fact was that the watchman of the district invariably passed along Grosvenor Street about ten minutes past every hour throughout the night; and the project which the venturesome damsel had in view, could not very well be carried out with success if the aforesaid nocturnal guardian happened to be in the neighbourhood at the time.

Supposing it, therefore, to be about two o'clock, she reckoned that if she let twenty minutes pass, she would be ensuring the safety of her scheme: and winding up the time-piece, she set it going. She now opened the drawers—took forth all the splendid cashmere shawls and the strongest satin scarves belonging to her mistress—and these she rolled up lengthwise into the form of a rope, fastening them together. Remorselessly and unhesitatingly did she thus treat those handsome articles of apparel which in the aggregate cost hundreds of guineas—twisting and knotting them just as ruthlessly as if they were old rags: but then she had in view a certain project the success of which was a matter outweighing the price of all the finery in the world!

In this manner full twenty minutes were passed; and then the damsel prepared to carry her bold design into execution. First she pushed a heavy chest of drawers up against the window and completely round this ponderous piece of furniture did she pass the rope which she had made, not fastening it, but allowing it to run loosely as if over the wheel of a pulley. Then, against the chest of drawers she placed the sofa, a great arm-chair, and other things to keep it firm and steady:—and all this being done, she returned again to the ransacking of her mistress's wardrobe. But this time it was for some fitting garment to put on. Enveloping herself in the darkest coloured cloak she could find, and selecting the simplest straw-bonnet that presented itself, she now entered upon the crowning act of this night's strange drama.

Gently opening the lower part of the window she listened for a few moments—and no sound of human voice nor footfall reached her ears. Then she peeped forth—and by the mingled moonlight and lamp-light she was enabled to assure herself that the street was entirely deserted. All was still: not a light was even visible at any opposite window. Now, then, was the moment—now the opportunity. Nor did the heroic Gertrude shrink from the danger of her self-imposed task—appalling though that peril must have seemed to be, notwithstanding the marvellous intrepidity of her soul.

Having extinguished the light in the boudoir, she flung forth the rope in such a manner that it was doubled, both ends descending towards the pavement below; she then passed out of the window—and firmly clutching the double rope in both hands, while her feet clung to it also, she began to lower herself with amazing presence of mind. But scarcely had she thus commenced her fearful descent, when the straw-bonnet flew from her head and the cloak became detached from her person,—thus, leaving her in a state of semi-nudity and her hair all flowing wildly. The slanting moon-beams of silver played upon the countenance that expressed all the decision of a heroine—upon the bare bosom which remained upheaved with a strong feeling of suspense—and on the naked arms, so white and well-rounded which clung with such tenacity to the double rope. Fortunate perhaps was it for the damsel that she got rid of the encumbrance of the ample cloak, the folds of which might only have embarrassed the nimble play of her delicate feet and robust legs as

she slid gently down. Her lithe form, possessing all the suppleness of a Bayadere and the elasticity of a serpent, seemed to adapt itself yieldingly to the swaying of the rope and to every movement that she herself made in her perilous descent; nor less was it apparent that if with a perfect symmetry she blended great muscular power, to her love for her mistress she also united an extraordinary moral courage.

But 'tis done!—her delicate feet touched the pavement—and she stands safely in the street! A minute had scarcely elapsed since she crept forth from the window above! The moment she thus stands upon firm ground, she picks up the cloak and the bonnet, and her semi-nude form is again enveloped in the capacious mantle, while her disordered hair is gathered up hastily beneath the straw-hat. Then she takes the end of one length of the rope only, and by pulling it towards her, draws it down from the chest of drawers in the boudoir, just as a rope passes over a drum-wheel when one end is detached. She now coils up this rope of shawls with the utmost despatch—conceals it under her mantle—and hurries away. Thus the only outward and visible trace that is left of her exploit, is the open window of the boudoir: but being an upper one, the watchman—even if he saw it when passing by—would not think it necessary to raise an alarm on that account.

Away sped Gertrude to Soho Square; and on reaching Mr. Gale's establishment, she was immediately admitted, some of the servants of that establishment remaining up all night. On asking for Mrs. Gale, she was told that this "lady" had retired to rest: but Gertrude, by stating that her business was of the utmost importance, induced one of the servants to arouse the mistress of the place. Finally after some little trouble, Gertrude was enabled to obtain an interview with Mrs. Gale: and the moment they were alone together, the damsel requested that she might see the Countess of Curzon immediately. Mrs. Gale asked if anything unpleasant had occurred: to which Gertrude replied in the affirmative, without however entering into particulars. Mrs. Gale, notwithstanding heard enough to induce her to repair to the chamber where the Countess and Emerson were together: and to be brief, in a few minutes Editha was conducted to the apartment where Gertrude had waited.

Mrs. Gale withdrew; and the Countess of Curzon, who had only huddled on a few clothes exclaimed with a tone and look of

poignant alarm, "Good heavens Gertrude! what had happened?"

The abigail proceeded to narrate all that had taken place,—how the Earl had returned—how the Earl had discovered that she was disguised in her mistress's apparel—how he had opened the desk and possessed himself of Lady Lechmere's note as well as the forged bills how he had locked her in the boudoir—and how she had escaped thence in the manner just described.

It would be impossible to convey an idea of thrilling, feverish, and rapid transitions of emotion through which the Countess passed, as these hurried incidents struck one after the other upon her ear. Alarm at the return of her husband—terror at the discoveries he had made—admiration of Gertrude's devoted conduct—the excitement of absolute horror at her perilous descent—and then fresh fears and apprehensions on her own account,—these were the startling and stirring feelings which in rapid succession were conjured up by Gertrude's narrative. But when the intrepid young woman displayed that coil of rope made of twisted shawls, and which she had brought thither, Editha's emotion of wonder and admiration triumphed for the instant over the more selfish sensations of alarm on her own account: and flinging her arms about the girl's neck the Countess embraced her with her loveliest gratitude and affection.

"I thought your ladyship know of all that has happened as speedily as possible," said Gertrude. "In the first place, I feared lest his lordship should by any accident suspect that you were here and come to seek you. Secondly, I thought that if when you returned home in the morning, disguised in my apparel and unprepared to receive the Earl, you suddenly encountered him you would be so completely overwhelmed that no possible excuse or explanation would come to your aid. And thirdly, it struck me that if any tale can possibly be made up to save your ladyship's honour; it will be necessary to lose no time in putting Lady Lechmere on her guard, should the Earl take it into his head to call and question her. For all these reasons I felt assured it would be better to warn you at once of what had occurred; and hence my resolve to escape from that boudoir and join you here at any risk."

"Never, never, dear Gertrude," exclaimed the Countess, "shall I forget this more than kindness—this positive devotion—on your part. No sister would have risked a hundredth part as much for me!

But what is to be done! what on earth can be done? Idiot, idiot that I was to leave those bills in my desk!—yes, or to leave even so slight a clue as that note which he showed you, and the contents of which you have recapitulated to me! Ah! wretched woman that I am," she cried, wringing her hands bitterly. "Like all my five sisters—like my mother—like my aunts—like every female member, in fine, of my family—am I destined to be dishonoured and disgraced! O Gertrude. Gertrude! what a scandal—what an excitement will there be in the fashionable world to-morrow when the explosion takes place!"

"But lady—dear lady," interrupted the girl, "is all this risk that I have run to be in vain? Can you devise nothing—can you think of nothing to avert the impending ruin?"

"I do not see what can be done," answered the almost distracted Editha. "Even if I could get back unperceived into the house, the evidence is too strong against me. Those bills—those dreadful bills—and then Lechmere's unfortunate note—O Gertrude, I am undone—I am undone! Ruin is inevitable—destruction is certain!"

"Yes—if you meet your misfortunes half-way, or sink down under them at once," exclaimed Gertrude. "But, happen what will, your ladyship must not stay here another minute; for if the Earl *did* come and find you in such a place—pardon me the observation—there would *then* be no hope nor chance of either explaining away existing circumstances, or of eventual reconciliation."

"Then what would you advise?" asked the Countess, with all the fluttering of painful excitement. "Whither shall I go?—what asylum shall I seek?"

"Come home, my lady—and dare it all!" rejoined Gertrude: "that is the best plan! Who knows what the chapter of accidents may turn up in your favour? But of course, if you once absent yourself from your home and the household knows it, then do you convict yourself beyond all redemption."

"But how, in the name of heaven, are we to enter?" demanded the Countess. "Surely not by the same way that you ere now quitted the mansion?" she said, with hysterical laugh,

"Your ladyship forgets," said the abigail "that if nothing had happened you would have returned home between five and six in the morning, as on former occasions."

"Yes—dressed in your apparel, my dear Gertrude," exclaimed the Countess, suddenly recollecting these matters which had been lost sight of in the poignancy of her alarm: "and I have the key of the area-door with me—Oh! all this had slipped my memory!"

"Hasten, my lady—and let us depart" said Gertrude. "Come—time presses —"

"One minute, and I will return!" exclaimed the Countess: and she quitted the room where all this colloquy took place.

What she said to Emmerson on returning to him, or what they arranged between themselves during the few minutes that they hurriedly conversed while the Countess finished dressing herself, matters not now. Suffice it to say that the infatuated bill-broker wrote her ladyship a check upon his banker for a couple of thousand pounds and that she soon afterwards quitted Mr. Gale's establishment in company with Gertrude.

Back to Grosvenor Street did the lady and the lady's-maid proceed together. The boudoir-window was still open; and not a light was visible in any part of the house. That Gertrude's flight had remained undiscovered was therefore evident; and that the Earl had retired to rest was presumable, if not certain.

Editha and her maid descended the area-steps and entered the house by means of a duplicate key of the servants' door, which her ladyship had in her possession. During the walk home from Soho Square, they had determined what course to pursue. Most of the locks of the upper chambers were of pretty well the same pattern; and Gertrude had assured her mistress that several of the bedroom-keys fitted each other's doors, and that it was more than probable one of them would suit that of the boudoir. If this should prove to be the case, it was decided that the Countess should take possession of the boudoir, so that the Earl might be completely astounded when he went thither with the idea of liberating Gertrude in the morning,—it being also hoped by the two artful women that this mystification would render him more pliant and accessible to any artifices that might be adopted to explain away the present suspicions. But on the other hand if no key could be found to open the boudoir, then it was resolved that the Countess should pass the night in another chamber, and that all the rest should be left entirely to the chapter of accidents.

Such were the plans deliberated upon and settled during the hurried twenty

minutes' walk from Soho Square Grosvenor Street; and now that Editha and her faithful abigail were once more within the walls of Curzon House, the heart of each beat with acute suspense. They had to grope their way in the dark, not daring to run the risk of being observed wandering about the house with a candle. Like spirits did they steal from the lower regions up into the hall; and as noiselessly and carefully did they thence ascend the principal staircase to the storeys above. There they speedily possessed themselves of half-a-dozen keys, which the expert lady'smaid, whose presence of mind exceeded that of her mistress, tried in the lock of the boudoir-door. Now was she disappointed in the calculation she had made, inasmuch as one of them turned easily in the lock.

Editha and Gertrude entered, locking the door behind them, although the latter did not purpose to remain long in the boudoir. To shut down the window and put the furniture back into its place, were now the next steps adopted by Editha and her maid; and notwithstanding they were in the dark, they nevertheless made these adjustments as noiselessly as possible. Gertrude then assisted Editha to undress herself; and having done this, she prepared to leave her ladyship for the rest of the night—or rather for the next few hours of the morning.

"Pray sustain your spirits, my lady," said the faithful girl, and there is no telling what may happen for the best. But mind when your ladyship locks the door after me that you take out the key; so that when his lordship comes in the morning there may be no impediment to his unlocking the door. Then what will be his surprise at finding your ladyship here instead of me!"

Editha was about to make some reply when a noise, as of some one moving about the house, reached their ears. They remained dead silent, holding their very breath to listen. Then sounds of footsteps stealthily creaking approached the door of the boudoir: and now Gertrude, with admirable presence of mind, drew forth the key from the lock.

"Why did you do that?" asked Editha, in the lowest possible whisper.

"Oh! my dear lady," responded Gertrude, in a tone of concentrated joy. Though likewise speaking in a whisper,— "because I suddenly behold a means of accomplishing your salvation! Hush—hush!"

And in a few moments, as the steps outside stopped at the door, the lady and the

maid both heard a key cautiously introduced into the lock. Thereupon the Countess of Curzon, suddenly divined the truth—that same truth which had already struck Gertrude, and the important results of which the astute girl immediately foreseen. Yes—it was now apparent enough to Editha also: her husband, the Earl was no doubt coming to share the couch of the lady's maid!

A few more whispered words passed rapidly between Editha and Gertrude—but so low that they were only just audible to themselves, and could not have been heard by anybody even at a couple of yards distance.

That the Earl was approaching without a light was certain, because not a ray gleamed through the key-hole, nor shone under the door. And now this door was slowly opened; and Gertrude, assuming the frightened tone of one suddenly starting from her sleep, exclaimed. "Who is there?"

"'Tis I, dearest Gertrude?" answered the Earl, in a tone that was tremulous with desire; and he closed the door behind him.

"But, my lord—I thought that you had conceived a hatred for me ere now?" exclaimed the abigail, in a deprecatory tone.

"Ah! but I was enraged, dear girl—cruelly enraged," replied curzon.—now pausing to lock the door. "But on retiring to rest I could not sleep—and gradually your image rose up in my mind until at last it has so far got the better of all other thoughts and impressions, that I have resolved to enjoy a few hours of love and bliss in your arms, and leave until tomorrow the vexations, the scandals, and the exposures that may belong thereto. So let me, embrace thee, dearest Gertrude—let me embrace thee!" cried the Earl, his voice now swelling with the tremulous exultation of desire mingled with anticipated triumph.

And through the utter darkness of that boudoir did he feel his way towards the couch, into which Editha—his own wife Editha—had stealthily crept, while Gertrude had glided away after answering him, into the farthest corner of the room.

* * * * *

"Wherefore will you not speak to me dearest girl?" asked the Earl of Curzon, in a voice stifling with desire. "Ah! you murmur something with those sweet lips of your's—but I cannot catch your words—no matter—I kiss your lips, and you kiss back again! The faithless Editha—

this is almost punishment enough for her perfidy, if she did but know it! But she cannot know it—she will never know it! And you will turn against her, dear girl—will you not? Ah! wherefore that impatient ejaculation? Well, I will speak to you no more upon that topic—at least for the present. To-morrow—or another time—Ah! my darling Gertrude, I love you—yes I love you: and I will forgive your taciturnity—your silence—if you will continue to lavish those tender kisses upon me!”

* * * * *

About an hour afterwards, when all was still and quiet in the boudoir, some one cautiously unlocked the door and stole forth, closing the door as noiselessly again behind her, but now leaving it unlocked.

The person who thus stole forth, was Gertrude: and ascending to her own chamber on the storey above, she procured a light. With the candle in her hand, she once more descended: and this time she stole guardedly and with spirit-like tread to the Earl of Curzon's own apartment—that apartment which he had ere now left to seek the boudoir. In this apartment Gertrude forthwith instituted a minute search; and after some delay, she found what she sought concealed amongst the linen in one of the Earl's drawers. Joyous as if she had discovered a treasure, and triumphant as if she had just achieved some important victory, the damsel stole up again to her own chamber: and before she retired to rest, she set fire to a quantity of papers and threw them into the grate, gaily and cheerfully watching them till they consumed to tinder. She then extinguished the light, and laid down to repose.

But in about three hours Gertrude awoke: and it being now daylight, she got up. Having arranged her beautiful hair, so dishevelled and disordered by the prominent adventure of the preceding night, and having refreshed herself with ablutions in the chill water, she put on the plain but neat and becoming apparel of her station. When she had thus concluded her toilette, she went downstairs to the servants' hall, to wait till her mistress's bell should ring.

The light of the new-born day had already rendered everything plainly visible within the boudoir, when the Earl of Curzon awoke from a slumber where the image of Gertrude had seemed to be strangely mingling with scenes in which his faithless wife and Colonel Malpas also

figured. He rubbed his eyes—threw a hasty glance around the room—and on recognising where he was, all the incidents of the past night came trooping in with rapid march upon his memory. Turning towards his companion, a sudden ejaculation of astonishment and dismay burst from his lips, when he encountered the arch and mischievous looks—*not* of the lovely Gertrude, as he had expected—but of his own wife, the Countess Editha!

“Heavens! what means that exclamation, Charles?” said her ladyship, affecting to be concerned and even terrified at the suddenness of her husband's cry.

“Is it a dream? can it be a dream?” muttered Curzon, pressing his hand to his brow and endeavouring to concentrate all his thoughts in one focus.

“Have you been labouring under some unpleasant dream?” asked Editha, now assuming a look of tender anxiety, while at the same time, unperceived by her husband, she pulled the bell-rope that hung behind the curtains of the bed.

“I cannot understand it—it is unaccountable!” said Curzon: then turning his eyes suddenly upon Editha, he demanded abruptly, “How came you here?”

“How came I here!” she echoed, with a tone and look of amazement. “Is it not my own room—the boudoir where I sleep when we do not pass the night together?—and therefore should I not rather ask how came *you* here?”

“Perdition! what means it all?” exclaimed the Earl: “am I mad? or have I really been dreaming?”

At this moment the door opened; and Gertrude made her appearance in answer to the summons of the boudoir-bell. Her looks were as composed, tranquil, and sedate as if nothing extraordinary had occurred during the past night; and when the Earl thus marked her unruffled mien and saw that there was nothing sly, arch or mischievous therein, he became more bewildered than ever. Again he pressed his hand upon his brow to steady his thoughts; and Gertrude availed herself of that opportunity to dart a sudden look of intelligence at Editha. Then did her ladyship's countenance become lighted up with an expression of joy and triumph: for she understood full well the meaning of her devoted abigail's glance—and she knew that she was saved!

“Did your ladyship ring?” asked Gertrude, in a tone as tranquil and respectful as usual.

“No,” answered Editha: “you can retire.”

The abigail accordingly withdrew; but scarcely had the door closed behind her when the Earl of Curzon, starting up in the couch, exclaimed. "Ah! your ladyship has manœuvr'd well! You were doubtless anxious that a witness should thus behold us together, so that there may be what the lawyers call a *condonation* on my part in respect to your bygone infidelities?"

"My lord, this to me!" exclaimed Editha, her eyes flashing fire, but rather with the triumph that blazed up in her bosom than with the anger which she assumed.

"Yes," continued the Earl of Curzon springing from the couch and hastily huddling on the slippers, trousers, and dressing-gown in which he had sought that boudoir during the night: "you think, madam, that I am either to be deceived by mystification or overreached by stratagem? That things have occurred which I cannot understand, I do not deny: but you will lean upon a fragile support if you fancy that because I have seen in your bed *after* the discovery of your infidelities, I have deprived myself of legal remedy. Ah! fool that I was ever to have fancied that you, issuing from such a precious stock, would do honour to the name of Curzon! But thank God! I possess the proofs of your infidelities and crimes: and you will perhaps understand me," he added with a sardonic malignity, "when I declare that the guilt of adultery have you super-added the black turpitude of forgery!"

"My lord!" exclaimed Editha, the richest crimson glowing beneath the soft duskiness of her skin, and mantling thus warmly not only upon the brow and the cheeks, but also the neck, the bare shoulders, and the naked bosom of the patrician lady: "you are a coward thus to insult a defenceless woman! If I had a dagger or a pistol at hand, I would lay you dead at my feet."

"Editha!" exclaimed the Earl, bending upon her a look in which wonder and scorn, uncertainty and hate, were strangely commingled: "can it be possible that you are unaware of what took place last night?—has there really been no communion between you and Gertrude?—did I not lock her in this room?—and whether you were concealed at the time, or whether by some means you penetrated hither afterwards, in any case must you be aware that your writing-desk furnished me with the proofs of your criminality."

"That you are base enough to ransack

my desk, my lord, is probable," cried Editha, the excitement of the scene and the consciousness of her safety inspiring her with all the presence of mind requisite to enact the part of outraged innocence: "but that you discovered in that desk aught whereof I need be ashamed, I positively deny."

"By heavens! this is too much" exclaimed Curzon, his naturally handsome countenance becoming distorted with rage. "The proofs, madam, are in my possession; the note of your accomplice Lady Lechmere—the forgeries—"

"Coward—liar!" exclaimed Editha springing like a tigress from the couch, "If there be forgeries in the case, 'tis you who have forged them! Ah! doubtless the trammels of matrimony are inconvenient to a man who wishes to pursue his own numerous intrigues; and therefore you seek to get rid of your wife. But no, my lord—I defy you—I defy you!"

The Earl of Curzon now gazed with unmixed astonishment upon Editha. Indeed for a few moments he was utterly confounded. The tone of confidence in which she spoke, the genuine indignation which appeared to inspire her, the undismayed assurance with which she met his looks, and indeed almost beat them down with her own proud and haughty ones—all this struck the nobleman speechless and motionless. And, heavens! how grandly, how sublimely beautiful seemed the Countess of Curzon at the moment—no longer soft, languishing, and amorous like a dusky houri of Mohammed's paradise, but bursting forth into the personification of Bellona the Goddess of War, so that her very beauty became terrible to gaze upon, and the eyes that were wont to burn with the fires of love, now shot forth blasting lightnings. With the scant night-dress alone draping her form—her luxuriant purple sable hair flowing in heavy masses over her shoulders and down her back—her heaving bust all exposed in its glowing firmness—one arm gracefully curved, the other extended so as with imperious gesture to enhance the force of her language—her nude feet and ankles exposed in their sculptural symmetry to the middle of the legs' robust swell—her whole figure in fine, seemed to realise all that artist ever fancied, poet ever dreamed or sculptor ever designed in the form of peerless beauty vindicating its outraged innocence!

"But, Ah! all the glory, the magic, and the sublimity of that scene sink into degradation, shame, and infamy, when it is remembered that Editha was really guilty,

and that the part which she now enacted was one of consummate duplicity, and exquisite hypocrisy. For a few moments, we say did the Earl of Curzon remain utterly confounded—annihilated as it were—by the demeanour, the conduct, and the language of his wife. It was either the most stupendous effrontery that woman ever yet had exhibited—or else, if she were innocent, was she the victim of the most extraordinary combination of circumstances ever known. But not long did the Earl of Curzon hesitate between these alternatives. Too much a man of the world to yield a ready credulity to any appearances of innocence, and too deeply conscious of error himself not to be ever ready to believe the errors of others, he soon burst forth into a laugh of bitter scorn, exclaiming, “Ah! I see how it is, madam, you fancy that in your prudence you have destroyed all evidences of your guilt! But your memory fails you—for whatever your intentions might have been, you certainly have not altogether carried them out. I tell you that I possess *proofs*—”

“Then produce them, my lord,” said Editha, in a tone of defiance.

“I will, I will :” and he turned towards the door.

“And if you do not,” she said springing forward and detaining him by the arm for a moment,—“as a robleman—a gentleman—a man—shall I also say as a *husband*—it will be your duty—”

“Yes; to fall upon my knees and demand pardon for this outrage—these suspicions!” ejaculated Curzon, throwing upon his wife a look of dark malignity, as much as to imply that it was perfect madness to suppose there was any chance of his being compelled to humble himself thus.

“Be it so,” she observed, in a tone of confidence, as she released his arm from the firm grasp which her delicate fingers had fixed upon it,

The earl hastened from the boudoir and sped to his own apartment, murmuring to himself, “Now for the proofs that shall overwhelm her with confusion!”

He opened the drawer—he tossed aside his linen : but the object of his search was not there! A chill struck to his heart, as the idea of some deep but inexplicable treachery flashed to his mind. Furious with rage, but trembling all over as nervously as if stricken with a palsy, he tore out the drawer from its place and emptied all its contents on the carpet. But the packet which he sought—that

packet which contained Lady Lechmere’s note and the forged bills—had disappeared.

No wonder indeed : for it was this same packet which Gertrude had found, and the contents of which she had burnt in her own chamber. Yes—and this was the meaning of that significant look which she had flung upon her mistress when entering the boudoir—that look which told Editha she was saved!

Pale, trembling, and overwhelmed, the Earl of Curzon sank into an armchair and gave way to his painful reflections. To believe that all the incidents of the past night belonged only to a dream, was ridiculous : but that he had been singularly, mysteriously, and effectually out-witted, was evident. He had not a proof—not a single proof—of his wife’s guilt : and yet he knew her to be guilty. He had only just come from sharing her couch ; and therefore to dream of law-proceedings was preposterous. To create an exposure and a scandal by repudiating his wife on bare suspicion, and without being enabled to follow up such an act by the usual legal process, would be only to render himself contemptible as a jealous husband.

Such were the thoughts that passed rapidly through the Earl’s mind and perceiving that he was in every way outwitted and deprived of remedy, he suddenly made up his mind to put as good a face as possible upon the matter *for the present*. He accordingly returned to the boudoir, where he found Editha combing out her long shining hair. As he entered the room she turned towards him ; and with a look full of calm confidence—for all her recent excitement appeared to have cooled down—she said, “Well, my lord, what aspect does the matter now wear?”

“Editha,” he responded, assuming a jocular air, “I must confess that I am completely out-manceuvred. I don’t know how—but I think it is tolerably clear that your maid Gertrude is a young woman of no ordinary ability and tact—for which qualities you doubtless value her so much.”

“But is it also for the same reason your lordship seeks to deprive me of her by making her your mistress?”—and as Editha gave this bitter retort, her beautiful lips curled with relentless irony.

“Well, I think that the less said upon all these things for the present, the better,” returned the Earl of Curzon, affecting to laugh : and with these words he was about to quit the room, when Editha caught him by the arm. “What ! is there anything more to say?” he demanded.

“Yes,” she replied, with firmness of

voice and decision of look "as a nobleman, as a gentleman, and as a husband you have to apologise for having dared to accuse me without proof."

"Oh! yes—I remember that I pledged myself to some such apology as this: and therefore," he continued, with an air of mock gravity, "I beg to tender my earnest excuses to your ladyship for having ventured to suspect your purity and fidelity; and I may add that I am now entirely convinced that you are as immaculate as a wife can be——"

"Enough!" exclaimed Editha, colouring with indignation, as her husband's tone grew more and more bantering. "You have made the apology—and that is sufficient."

The Earl affected to laugh gaily, and quitted the boudoir.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MORE MYSTIFICATION.

We may now explain to the reader the precise manner in which the Countess of Curzon had been accustomed to manage her intrigues through the agency of Lady Lechmere.

As was particularly the case in those times, with married couples in high life who did not live upon the very best terms together, the Earl and Countess of Curzon frequently occupied separate bed-chambers—the Earl having an apartment which was called his own private one and the Countess having her boudoir. It was therefore comparatively an easy thing for her ladyship occasionally to stay out all night if she chose—the only precaution needful being to prevent the servants (Gertrude excepted) from discovering the fact. Hence the contrivance into which the reader has already obtained something more than an insight. Thus, for instance, the Countess went in full dress and in her own carriage to Lady Lechmere's house; a few hours later Gertrude met her there;—their apparel was speedily changed—and while Gertrude, playing the part of Countess, was driven back in the carriage, the Countess herself repaired whithersoever she chose. Then, at day-break apparelled as Gertrude, the Countess would return to the mansion in safety. If seen thus coming home by any of the servants, the supposition was that the young lady's maid—for whom of course Editha would be taken—had passed the night at her parents' house:

and on the occasions when these stratagems were to be carried into effect, Gertrude was wont to take the precaution in the evening of casually mentioning in the servant's hall that she had received permission from her mistress to remain with her mother till the following morning.

But there was another phase which the stratagem assumed, involving a certain alteration of its details, according to circumstances. Thus, for instance, if Editha required an excuse to be absent from home for only a few hours during the evening, she would pretend to have received an invitation from Lady Lechmere to a party: but Gertrude, muffled in Editha's ermine cloak and perhaps wearing her veil, would proceed in the carriage to Lady Lechmere's, where instead of any evening party at all, the servants would receive positive orders from their mistress to admit *only the Countess of Curzon*. Thus Gertrude, disguised as the Countess, would be shown up into Lady Lechmere's boudoir, and there remain for two or three hours, as the case might be, until the carriage came to fetch her home again. Thus, all the while, the coachman and lacquey attached to Lady Curzon's carriage would naturally suppose that it was their mistress whom they had driven to Lady Lechmere's at eight or nine and fetched home again at twelve or one: while on the other hand, Lady Lechmere's domestics were equally remote from suspecting that it was any other than the Countess of Curzon who thus came and passed several hours *tete-a-tete* with their mistress.

The reader will now understand the meaning of that note, bearing the signature of Lady Lechmere, which the Earl of Curzon had found in his wife's writing-desk. But wherefore were all those strangely ramified precautions necessary? Because Editha was too prudent to have incurred the risk of allowing either Malpas or Emmerson to pass the night with her in her own boudoir at home; and therefore it was necessary to devise measures to enable her to meet her *paramour* for the time being at Mrs. Gale's house of accommodation in Soho Square. But of course she could not drive thither openly and fearlessly in her carriage; and when going out of an evening, she could not possibly devise any excuse to dispense with the carriage: she could not say she was going anywhere on foot or that she preferred a hackney-coach. She must therefore *seem* to use the carriage, even if she did not in reality: hence the astute arrangement of allowing Gertrude to take her place and

perform her part, while she herself, modestly disguised in Gertrude's unobtrusive apparel, enjoyed unlimited freedom combined with a rare security.

Having given these few explanations, we now resume the thread of our narrative. As a matter of course, the Earl of Curzon was not satisfied at the result of the adventures which have occupied the two or three preceding chapters. As we have already stated, he saw that he had been outwitted: but *how*, he could not altogether conjecture. That Gertrude had purloined the document from his own apartment he failed not to guess: but the great mystery to him was how his own wife Editha had been his partner of the couch in the boudoir instead of Gertrude. He had assuredly locked the young abigail in that boudoir, and it was her voice which he had subsequently recognised beyond all possibility of doubt, when he returned to that room later in the night. But while revolving all these things in his mind, he recollected that on seeking the couch in the boudoir, when fancying he was about to be clasped in the arms of Gertrude, he had locked the door: and he likewise recollected that in the morning the door was *unlocked*, when Gertrude entered to ask if her mistress had rung. The door, therefore, had been unlocked by somebody and if so, the presence of Editha in the couch with him might be easily accounted for by supposing that while he slept Gertrude had risen and changed places with the Countess. Then, if this were the case, and if this supposition were the correct one, had the beautiful Gertrude been for any time his companion in that bed? At first he was inclined to believe so: but then he reflected that from the very instant he entered that couch and was clasped in the arms of the female occupying it, this female observed a profound silence—nor could he by coaxing or entreaty succeed in eliciting from her a single word. This circumstance proved, then, that it must have been Editha who was occupying that couch when he entered the room,—Editha who received him in her arms—Editha whom he had so fondly and passionately embraced, while all the time fancying that he was enjoying the transports of love in the arms of Gertrude! It was therefore quite clear, from this chain of reasoning, that Editha must have been in the room *with* Gertrude when he went thither in the dark, and that while Editha prepared to receive him in her arms, Gertrude's voice deluded him into the belief that it was she herself who was

the sole occupant of that couch which he sought.

Having come to these conclusions, the Earl of Curzon felt less satisfied and more piqued than ever. Not only had he been outwitted by his wife in every way; but he was also duped by her abigail. That he was so duped, Editha well knew: and thus the two together—mistress and maid—had not only utterly baffled all his endeavours to establish the proofs of the former's infidelity, but were enabled to have a good laugh together at his expense. Nothing, in fact could be more ridiculous than the position which he felt he occupied in the eyes not only of Editha, but also of Gertrude: and he was determined to be revenged on them both. Of course, as the master of the house, he could at once have discharged the young lady's maid: but as there was no ostensible cause to allege for taking such a decisive proceeding upon himself, it would appear most arbitrary and unjust—besides it's being a most unusual thing for the husband to interfere with the wife's special dependants. Moreover, the mere discharge of Gertrude would in itself be an act for which she would care so little, as to be totally incommensurate with the amount of revenge he sought. She had humbled his pride—she had aided her mistress to baffle and outwit him: and though not naturally of a cowardly character or unmanly disposition, the Earl resolved upon some signal and cruel revenge.

The reader will perhaps wonder why he did not call upon Lady Lechmere to see what he could discover relative to his wife's proceedings. But he was too much a man of the world not to know full well that to whatsoever extent Lady Lechmere connived at or assisted Editha's intrigues, she would be prepared to defend and protect them by giving an indignant denial to any accusation on the subject. Besides which the Earl had no idea of proclaiming to the world the ignominious fact that he knew himself to be a cuckold, but could not prove it, and was therefore compelled to endure his wife's infidelities.

There was however one person whom he resolved to see: and this was Emerson. But not for a moment did it strike the Earl that the bill-broker had become his wife's paramour. Whether they were even acquainted or not, he did not exactly know: but that Emerson had *privately* sent her back the bills which she had forged in favour of Colonel Malpas, was evident enough. How had this occurrence been brought about?—was Emerson

aware of Editha's guilt?—and if so to what extent? These were the particulars which the Earl of Curzon was desirous to ascertain: and therefore after a hurried breakfast, did he mount his horse, and attended by his groom, repair to the money-making regions of the City.

Mr. Emmerson was seated alone in his private office in Nicholas Lane, pondering somewhat gloomily on the occurrences of the preceding night, and wondering what on earth had been the issue of the adventure. From Editha's lips he had hurriedly heard how her husband had returned and had found the packet of forged bills in her desk—and in a few hastily-exchanged sentences they had agreed upon the outline of some tale, to be told by himself, should the Earl call on him to demand any explanation of the circumstance of his name being on the back of those forged bills. But whether this story, so hurriedly and imperfectly concocted, would serve any purpose at all, even if the Earl should call on him,—or whether the discoveries made by his lordship were of too serious and comprehensive a nature to be explained away by sophistry or accounted for by artifice,—these were the uncertainties between which Mr. Emmerson was painfully hovering at the moment when the office-boy entered to announce the Earl of Curzon!

Emmerson could not help trembling from head to foot through fear of detection, exposure, and chastisement. But not suffering his emotions to be perceived, he bade the boy at once introduce his lordship. Then, as the Earl made his appearance extending his hand with a sort of affable condescension and aristocratic patronage towards him, he felt persuaded that whatever might have been the issue of the previous night's adventure, he himself remained unsuspected.

"Pray sit down, my lord," said Emmerson bustling about to hand the nobleman a chair. "Will your lordship take a glass of wine and biscuit? It is just twelve o'clock—and though perhaps not lunch-time in the fashionable regions whence your lordship has just come——"

"Thank you, Emmerson," said the Earl, carelessly. "I have not long breakfasted. But what news in the City?"

"Why, would your lordship believe it—that conceited little humbug Mr. Under-sheriff Fire has actually not made an Alderman; and Tibbs, who has so long managed the revenues of the ward of Guzzelton, has been obliged to resign at last. But what is the business that has

procured me the honour of a call from your lordship this forenoon?"

"You remember, Emmerson," said the Earl "that when I called upon you two or three months ago about some little money matters, you seemed to think that I had a great many promissory notes and bills of exchange in the hands of different persons: and if I recollect right, I told you at the time that General Beechy, young George Sefton, Paul Dysart, and Colonel Malpas, amongst others, had all asked me, to become security for them?"

"I recollect perfectly well the conversation to which your lordship alludes," said Emmerson, who had by this time recovered all his wonted business-like composure, although he perceived plainly enough into what channel the discourse was about to be turned: but he was ready prepared with the tale agreed upon between himself and Editha.

"Now, it struck me at the time, continued the Earl, "that you were rather incredulous when I assured you that I had refused to have anything to do with all those persons."

"I certainly had reason, as I thought," said Emmerson coolly, "to doubt your lordship's word at the time of which we are speaking; inasmuch as at that very moment when you assured me that you had given no acceptances at all, I had in my cash-box several bills bearing your lordship's name, to the tune of five thousand guineas."

"Ah!" ejaculated the Earl, with a sort of subdued chuckle: for he now fancied that he was once more in the right track to bring all her guilt home to the faithless Editha. "I suppose them, Emmerson, you discovered those bills to be forgeries?" he added inquiringly.

"Yes, my lord, they were forgeries indeed, returned Emmerson; "and it was that scoundrel Malpas who forged them. But I thought that by this time you would have learnt——"

"Malpas forged them!" interrupted the Earl, looking very hard at the bill-broker. "Surely you must mistake? That he placed them in your hands, is one thing: but that he himself perpetrated the forgeries, is another."

"In this very office, my lord," said Emmerson, with increasing effrontery, "did Colonel Malpas, when taxed by me with the forgery, confess his guilt and implore my mercy. Of course I did not wish to send him to the scaffold; and therefore I allowed him to compromise the affair by making a simple debt of it; and

for that debt he is now a prisoner in the King's Bench."

"And you therefore gave him up the bills?" said the Earl of Curzon inquiringly.

"How is this, my lord?" ejaculated Emmerson with well-assumed astonishment. "Is it possible that your lordship never received those bills—But of course you have: otherwise how could you have obtained any knowledge of the matter at all?"

"Now, pray explain yourself, Emmerson," said the Earl, beginning to feel strangely bewildered once more, as if the mystifications of the previous night were to be perpetuated during the day and to follow him from the West End even into the heart of the City.

"The history of the bills is plain and simple enough," returned Emmerson. "I had already endorsed those bills in order to pay them into my banker's hands, when I discovered that they were forgeries. Although willing to avoid instituting a criminal process against Colonel Malpas, and to hush up the matter, I nevertheless thought, on mature reflection that you ought to be informed of it. I accordingly proceeded to Grosvenor Street to see your lordship on the subject. You were not however within: but her ladyship the Countess was at home and disengaged. Time being valuable to me, and not choosing to run the chance of calling three or four times without seeing your lordship, I took the liberty of requesting an interview with her ladyship, to whom I explained all that had occurred. Her ladyship was frightened lest the matter should breed some desperate quarrel between Malpas and your lordship, and end in a duel: she therefore suggested that it would be better to allow some little time to elapse, during which she undertook to seize some favourable opportunity to mention the whole transaction guardedly to your lordship. Well satisfied with this proposition, and acknowledging its prudence. I at once declared my readiness to leave the whole matter in the hands of her ladyship. I had not the bills with me at the time: but immediately on my return to Nicholas Lane, I enclosed them to her ladyship in an envelope marked '*Private*.' And now, my lord, you have the whole history of the transaction."

"Yes," stammered Curzon, scarcely able to conceal his astonishment at this unexpected explanation: "and I must admit that you acted very handsomely in the business."

"I presume that if the Countess of Curzon has not already mentioned the affair to your lordship, it has been for want of a suitable opportunity or else through oversight.

"I suppose it must be so," remarked Curzon, not knowing what to say and scarcely what to think: but still he was as far as ever from entertaining the remotest suspicion that Emmerson had become his wife's paramour.

Taking his leave, he issued forth from the money-lender's office and was about to remount his horse, when he was suddenly accosted by a well-dressed and good-looking young man whose countenance appeared to be familiar to him.

"My lord," said this individual, "will you excuse me for venturing to give your lordship a piece of advice?—but I conjure you to be careful in your dealings with that hypocritical miscreant Emmerson —"

"Ah!" ejaculated the Earl: "the advice is startling, but perhaps well meant. Who are you? I have seen your face before."

"Your lordship has seen me in that very office," was the response: and the young man glanced over his shoulder towards the door of Emmerson's place of business.

"Yes—I recollect you now," exclaimed the Earl: "your name is Varian."

"And if the world has heard of my crimes, it knows little of my misfortunes" said the young man bitterly. "If I were a culprit who deserved transportation, then that villain Emmerson is a man for whom even hanging is too good!"

"We cannot converse here, at Emmerson's very door," said the Earl: "and it is absolutely necessary that I should hear all you may have to unfold concerning your late master. Will you accompany me into some adjacent tavern?"

"No, my lord—not now," answered Varian. "Having received a full pardon I avail myself of the first leisure moment to come hither and seek an interview with the villain Emmerson in order to tax him with all his infamy and overwhelm him with reproaches. This is the beginning of the deadly revenge which I have sworn to wreak upon that man—a vengeance which will be accomplished by unmasking him to all with whom he has any dealings. Hence the liberty I have taken in accosting your lordship now —"

"Then will you call upon me at my own house, Mr. Varian?" asked the Earl.

"I will, my lord,"—and with these

words Theodore turned abruptly away and entered the bill-broker's office.

The Earl of Curzon then mounted his horse which his groom had been holding at a little distance, and riding back to the West End, he proceeded to Carlton House for the purpose of calling upon Lady Sackville.

CHAPTER XCIV.

ROYALTY'S FAVOURITE.

Venetia, elegantly dressed in a morning *negligee*, was seated upon the sofa with the Prince Regent, in her magnificent saloon at Carlton House.

His Royal Highness was gazing with the mingled ardour and languor of a passion which had been crowned with success, but which was nevertheless subjected to renewed excitement every time he found himself in contact with that woman of transcendent beauty. Thus while he experienced the voluptuous languor of gratified desires, he at the same time felt the flaming up of fresh longings in his soul. For it was impossible to be sated with the pleasures that were experienced in the arms of Venetia: her beauty was so grand, and at the same time so enchanting—her fascinations were so irresistible as well as so varied—that it was no wonder if she had obtained, in the short period of a few weeks, a more despotic empire than any woman had ever achieved before over the mind of his Royal Highness the Prince Regent.

Although in reality hating, abhorring, and detesting her lover—despising him as a man, and loathing him as a paramour—she nevertheless dissembled her heart's true feelings with such consummate success, that the Prince actually believed himself to be the object of her devoted affections. And no wonder: for with matchless duplicity she lavished upon him the tenderest caresses; and while she developed all the sensual blandishments of her naturally amorous disposition in order to render herself adorable as a *mistress*, she also studied to render available those qualifications which made her estimable as a *friend*. Thus was it that the Prince was gradually led to consult her in respect to political affairs and State questions; and he could not help observing that she was always prepared to express an opinion and proffer her advice on those points as if they had

previously formed the subject of her reflections. Whether her inspiration in these respects came from the intuitive promptings of her own intelligence,—or from the suggestions of her husband or from any other quarter we cannot now say: certain it is, however, that the advice which she thus gave was gradually beginning to wield a marked influence upon the Prince—the more so, inasmuch as she always spoke deferentially and not dictatorially, and with the air of a disinterested friend instead of that of a selfish narrow-minded mistress.

On the present occasion when we find Venetia and the Prince seated together upon the sofa, the conversation had been turning upon certain minor appointments in the civil and diplomatic departments which had to be filled up. A list of the names proposed respectively by the Foreign and Home Secretaries of State, had been submitted to his Royal Highness; and this list now lay upon a table near the sofa.

"Well, my dearest Venetia," said the Prince, "you have not given me your opinion relative to those names—and you know that I value your advice too much not to avail myself of it."

"My dear Prince, you do me honour," answered Venetia, flinging upon his Royal Highness the sweetest smiles, as a Hebe might be supposed to scatter the choicest flowers upon the god of her adoration. "There are about twenty names in that list," she continued, taking up the paper and scanning it deliberately; "and I must confess that I consider some of the proposed appointments injudicious to a degree."

"Can you suggest more suitable ones, Venetia?" asked the Prince, in a careless sort of way, as he toyed with one of her fair hands,

"Let me see," exclaimed the lady, tapping him on the cheek, and then taking his gold pencil-case from his waistcoat-pocket. "Here, my dear George, is the post of first Attache to the embassy in Spain about to be offered to Mr. Drummond, whereas Mr. Aruther Fitzherbert should decidedly have the preference."

"Why, he is the cousin by marriage of Mrs. Fitzherbert?" exclaimed the Prince: "and I have told you on three or four occasions already, that I have no reason to be pleased with that lady or with any of her connexions."

"Now, my dear Prince, you are not acting sensibly or justly," said Venetia, turning towards him and placing one of her taper

fingers upon his lip as if to prevent him from speaking farther for the moment: then as she poured upon him the golden flood of her radiant looks, she continued to observe, "If you have been enabled so readily to forget—or rather to repent of your ancient connection with Mrs. Fitzherbert, must I not fear that when wearied of me, you will cease to think of your poor Venetia with love and affection?"

"Never, never—my heart's darling!" cried the Prince, throwing his arms around her neck and drawing her towards him: then, as her superb bosom heaved and swelled against his chest, he said, "Ah! dearest Venetia, there is a great difference between *our* connexion and that which subsisted between me and Mrs. Fitzherbert. You are faithful to me—you will always be faithful: whereas she went to France—intrigued with the Marquis of Bellois—and became a mother by him;—then, on returning to England, she flew back to my arms, vaunting as it were her fidelity towards me—a fidelity in which for a time I was idiot enough to believe! Nor was the French Marquis her only paramour—Oh! I have had many and signal proofs of her scandalous infidelities and depravities! And now, therefore, can you wonder if, notwithstanding the tenderness of my original connexion with Mrs. Fitzherbert, I have been alienated from her for nearly twenty years?"

"All this is no doubt true enough, my dear George," said Venetia, redoubling the apparent ardour of her caresses and lavishing a thousand seeming proofs of tenderness upon her royal paramour, in order the more effectually to rivet the silken bonds and flowery fetters in which her fascinations held his soul captive. "But nevertheless," she continued, "you must not visit upon any of Mrs. Fitzherbert's relations the vindictive sentiments which you may experience towards herself,"

"Ah! even if I were inclined to do so, you would take care, my wily charmer, effectually to prevent it:"—and as the Prince thus spoke in a jocular manner, he indulged in delicious toyings and amorous dalliances with his beautiful mistress. "Why dearest Venetia," he continued, in a languid tone, "there are no less than three or four of Mrs. Fizerbert's relatives whom you have positively been the means of appointing to excellent posts within the last month."

"And yet, my dear George, you cannot attribute any sinister motives to me," said Venetia, "in having thus persuaded

you to perform what I have conceived to be mere acts of justice?"

"Sinister motives!" echoed the Prince. "Those, dearest girl, I should never think of attributing to *you*! But really you must have a marvellously refined sense of justice thus to intercede in behalf of the relatives of a lady whom, if she could reconquer her lost influence over me, *you* would have to regard as a rival."

"Not so, my dear George," exclaimed Venetia, with one of her sweetest smiles, "for if I mistake not, Mrs. Fitzherbert is now nearly sixty."

"True!" ejaculated the Prince; and the twenty years, which have elapsed since last I saw her, have no doubt made a wonderful alteration in her person. But tell me candidly, dear Venetia, do you know her?"

"You have already asked me this question three or four times," responded Lady Sackville, tapping his cheek playfully: "and I have as frequently assured you that I have never even seen Mrs. Fitzherbert,"

"But has she not written to solicit your good offices on behalf of her pauper relatives?" asked the Prince.

"No—on my honour she has not," replied Venetia, in a firm tone and with decisive look.

"Then it is really through kind and generous motives that you thus interest yourself in the matter?" observed his Royal Highness, interrogatively.

Again Venetia gave an emphatic answer in the affirmative.

"Well, you syren-charmer," said the Prince, completely yielding to the blandishments, the seductive wiles, and irresistible fascinations to which he was subjected not merely in the society but from the close contact of that woman of transcendent beauty,—"you must have your own way in all things! Therefore, as I have being troubled with those official lists, do you take the pencil and make what alterations therein you may think fit. I will at once affix my initials: and then the paper can go back to the Minister. So do this at once, Venetia: and then, instead of talking any more on business, which you know I hate, we will converse on the power, the influence, and the delights of love!"

"The most delicious of topics!" exclaimed Venetia, flinging a glance full of voluptuous tenderness upon the Prince: then gliding away from his side for a few moments, she sat down on a chair at the

table and made several erasures and alterations in the list of names.

"Now for my initials," said the Prince, also rising from the sofa and stooping over Venetia's shoulder when he observed her lay down the pencil-case: then seating himself by her side, he was about to sign the document, when his looks settled upon a particular name that figured therein. "Heyday!" he cried: "what is Captain Bathurst doing in this list?"

"I should have thought," said Venetia, with a charming smile of mingled deprecation and persuasion, "that the brother of your old friend, Miss Bathurst of Stratton Street, might have some little claim upon your royal notice——"

"But for years past, my beloved Venetia," exclaimed the Prince, "I have positively refused to do any more for that Bathurst family—always, as a matter of course excepting Horace—your com-
plaisant husband, dear Venetia," he added with a smile.

"Do not for a moment think that Horace has instigated me," exclaimed lady Sackville, "to become the means of providing for his relatives or connexions. I do this of my own accord, and simply because I consider——"

"Well, well," interrupted the Prince! you and I will not quarrel about trifles—and therefore you shall have your own way."

With these words his Royal Highness affixed his initials to the document: and this being done, the Prince and his lovely mistress continued to discourse for the next hour upon an infinite variety of pleasant nothings and charming trifles, which however the sprightliness of Venetia invested with ineffable attractions. At the end of the hour the Prince was compelled to leave her in order to assist at some ceremony connected with his high office; and Venetia retired to her boudoir.

Scarcely had she reached that chamber—so elegantly and at the same time so tastefully fitted up, and seeming in every way so well adapted for the mysteries of love, when Jessica entered to announce that the Earl of Curzon requested an immediate interview with her ladyship.

"Ah! he is returned then from France," murmured Venetia to herself; and she immediately ordered Jessica to hasten and introduce the nobleman to the boudoir.

For upwards of half-an-hour did the Earl of Curzon remain alone with Venetia in earnest conversation: but relative to the nature of their discourse

we need not at present offer any explanations. Suffice it to say, that it was no topic of tenderness or love which thus engaged their profound attention: and although, when rising to depart, the Earl ventured to breathe his hopes that the night of bliss which he had spent in that boudoir was not destined to be the only one, Venetia gave him but a few hurried and vague though apparently tender assurances; and Curzon, snatching a kiss from her delicious lips, took his leave of the beauteous creature.

On being again left alone, Lady Sackville sate down to pen a long letter; and scarcely had she concluded it when Jessica once more entered to announce a visitor. This time it was Sir Douglas Huntingdon; and Venetia at once desired the Baronet to be admitted to her presence.

CHAPTER C.

THE BARONET.—THE MARQUIS

The reader will be pleased to remember that Sir Douglas Huntingdon had obtained the pardon of Theodore Varian through the medium of Lady Sackville. On the occasion when he called upon her for this purpose, he had explained all his adventures at Shooter's Hill—everything that regarded Ariadne—concluding with the description of this young damsel's death. The reader will likewise recollect that Venetia has listened to him with a glitter of something like jealous uneasiness in her eyes; but that when she found the Baronet speaking of Ariadne only as an object of compassion, Venetia's countenance brightened up. Lastly, it must be remembered that when he described Ariadne's death—as the trance was then supposed to be—Venetia had murmured to herself a few words expressive of a wish that the day of retribution might sooner or later overtake the Marquis of Leveson.

More than a week had now elapsed since that interview between Lady Sackville and Sir Douglas Huntingdon; and during this interval the Baronet had not called again at Carlton House. Venetia was therefore ignorant of the circumstance of Ariadne's restoration to life, which indeed had only taken place a couple of days previous to the one whereof we are now writing: and we should observe that the interest and the gold of the Marquis of Leveson had

succeeded in keeping the circumstance out of the newspapers of the day.

"You must have thought that something fatal had happened to me," observed the Baronet, as he entered the boudoir: that is to say, if you condescended to devote a moment's thought to me at all?"

"My dear Douglas," said Venetia, motioning him to take a seat upon the sofa by her side, "you are aware that whatever my failings may be, a ridiculous affectation is not one of them: and therefore I will candidly confess that I have been both surprised and grieved to think that you have allowed nine or ten days to pass without coming near me."

"Ah! do not chide me, dear Venetia," said the Baronet taking her hand and pressing it to his lips. "You are aware that I had much to annoy me—much to occupy my attention—"

"Your mansion was burnt down," observed Venetia; "and that was certainly enough to cause you much vexation. But you are rich—and the loss can soon be repaired. Wherefore, then, seem so dull—so melancholy—so pensive? it is not natural—Ah! I understand you now," she abruptly exclaimed, withdrawing her hand as suddenly: "the death of that poor girl whom you picked up at Shooter's Hill, has affected you more than you choose to admit."

"You will be surprised, Venetia," said the Baronet, "to learn that the poor girl, of whom you speak, is not dead after all."

"What mean you?" cried Venetia gazing upon the Baronet with unfeigned wonder. "Did you not tell me that she was no more—that she had died through the brutality of the Marquis of Leveson—"

"'Tis an amazing and extraordinary history altogether," interrupted the Baronet. "In a word, Ariadne Varian was plunged into a profound trance from which she was miraculously awakened the day before yesterday."

"Sir Douglas Huntingdon then proceeded to recite those particulars connected with the damsel's resuscitation, which are already known to the reader, and which were fraught with so wild, so romantic, and yet so deep an interest."

"And where is Miss Varian now?" asked Venetia, profoundly amazed at all that she had just heard.

"She was last evening removed," answered the Baronet, "under the care of my housekeeper Mrs. Baines, to apartments which have been taken for the purpose in a secluded and quiet neighbourhood. It

was at first thought requisite to allow her to remain for a few days at Leveson House: but the indignity she had endured beneath that roof and the horrors to which that outrage had led, produced such an effect upon her mind that the physician were compelled to consent to her removal thus speedily. Her brother is with her in her new abode—"

"And doubtless Sir Douglas Huntingdon will be a constant visitor there?" interrupted Venetia, with a slight movement indicative of annoyance, and with a look that was the least thing piqued and pouting.

"Ah! 'tis cruel thus to suspect the fidelity of a heart devoted to your charms!" exclaimed the Baronet, sinking upon his knees at Venetia's feet. "But I will confess that this strange episode of which Ariadne Varian is the heroine, has produced a singular—and indeed unpleasant effect upon my mind: it has unsettled me—it has thrown a damp as it were upon my spirits—it has rendered me restless and uneasy—"

"My dear Douglas," observed Venetia, the colour mounting to her cheeks, as she bent her beauteous head towards the Baronet, who knelt at her feet,—“you are in love with that girl—and you are now, with wonderful ingenuousness, confessing to me all the minute symptoms of your passion!"

"No, Venetia—no!" exclaimed Sir Douglas starting from his knees and resuming his place by her side upon the sofa. "Even if I may have fancied so for a moment, it was but a dream. Indeed, I experienced a boundless compassion—an illimitable sympathy—for that poor girl, who saved my life at the murderers' hut, and whom circumstances thus so singularly placed in my care."

"I tell you, Douglas," interrupted Venetia, gently repulsing his hand as he attempted to take her's,—“I tell you that you love Ariadne Varian! And why should you not? If she be beautiful, and amiable, and good, she is doubtless worthy of your affection—"

"What? the sister of a poor clerk!" ejaculated the Baronet; "and he a man whom the law has branded and whom society will ever regard as an outcast—although the royal prerogative, influenced by your goodness, has pardoned him!"

But are not you the master of your own actions?" inquired Venetia bending down her eyes: "and may you not, if you choose, marry this girl, obscure and humble though she be? As for her brother's unhappy

position—wherefore should she suffer for his errors?"

"Oh! it is useless thus to argue the point, Venetia," cried Sir Douglas Huntingdon, somewhat impatiently: "for I tell you that I love not Ariadne Varian!"

"And I, who perhaps know the human heart better than you," returned Venetia, "in spite of all your worldly experience—I tell you, I say, that you *do* love her, and in the recesses of your soul there is at this moment a voice which echoes the assertion I have just made! Now, my dear Douglas," she observed, looking suddenly up with a kind and amiable expression, of countenance, "the feelings that must henceforth subsist between you and me, is friendship—and nothing more!"

"Ah! cruel Venetia," exclaimed the Baronet: "have you not given me other hopes?—have you not filled my heart with the paradise of blissful expectations?—and now will you render that heart a desert?"

"No—believe me, dear Douglas," rejoined Venetia, with an amiable smile "your heart will not be a desert—for it will be filled with the image of Ariadne Varian!"

Sir Douglas Huntingdon was about to make some reply, and urge the assurance that the image of Venetia alone occupied his heart, when Jessica again made her appearance in the boudoir.

"The Marquis of Leveson," she said, "requests an immediate interview with your ladyship. His lordship told the footman that he had some business of importance to communicate to your ladyship, and he is now waiting in the drawing-room."

"Ah! I think that I can guess the nature of Lord Leveson's business," observed Venetia, with a look of indescribable vexation, as she turned towards Sir Douglas Huntingdon. "You, my dear friend, who have so recently become acquainted with all my secrets and who therefore understand my exact position so well,—you, I say, can see at a glance how it is that circumstances have to some extent placed me in the power of the Marquis of Leveson."

"Yes, dearest Venetia," replied the Baronet: "I understand what you mean. But is he not to some extent in my power?—have I not the means of subjecting both himself and his niece to a terrific exposure? Louisa first—Ariadne next—Oh! the villain—if he dare use menaces to coerce you, Venetia, I will defend you—I will protect you—I will save you from his power!"

"Ten thousand thanks, dear friend, for these assurances," exclaimed Venetia, now of her own accord grasping that hand which she had a few minutes previously repulsed, "But shall I see that Marquis?"

"By all means," rejoined the Baronet: "let us at once ascertain what it is that he requires. After all, it is possible that you may be mistaken as to the object of his visit——"

"No, no," interrupted Venetia, impetuously: "I am convinced that it is with no friendly object he has come hither. Persevering and energetic in accomplishing his aims—insatiable in his sensual longings—no sooner has one intended victim escaped from his toils, when, he flies in pursuit of another——"

"Then, all things considered," exclaimed the Baronet. "you would do well to receive the Marquis here: and permit me to remain an unseen witness of the interview, either to be near to protect you from personal insult, or to learn those particulars that shall guide my actions for your future rescue."

"Be it as you say," rejoined Venetia: then turning to Jessica she said, Let the Marquis be conducted hither.

The lady's-maid, who had been permitted to hear the preceding colloquy because she was well acquainted with all the secrets of her mistress, hastily withdrew; and the moment the door had closed Sir Douglas Huntingdon ensconced himself behind that selfsame screen which on a former occasion had served for his hiding place. Lady Sackville hastened to compose her features and settle herself as it were with a becoming dignity upon the sofa, in order to receive the Marquis of Leveson: and accordingly, in a few minutes, the nobleman was ushered into the boudoir.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," he exclaimed, advancing towards Venetia, "to be admitted into the very bower of love and beauty—the mysterious scene of an ineffable fascinations——"

"Was it for the purpose of indulging in this absurd rhapsody, that your lordship sent so pressing a demand for an audience?"—and as Venetia thus spoke, with a sarcasm in her accents and a subdued contemptuousness in her looks, she rose from the sofa as much as to imply that she wished the interview to be already at an end.

"Your ladyship is severe—too severe," observed the Marquis, with a malignant glance, which seemed to infer that the hour of his triumph was drawing near: then with a low bow he asked, "Is it your

ladyship's pleasure that I should remain standing?"

"Oh! assuredly not," exclaimed Venetia, with a glance which seemed to fling back the defiance of his lordship's looks. "Pray be seated:" and she herself resumed her place upon the sofa.

The Marquis fixed his eyes steadily upon Lady Sackville; and as with one comprehensive look he embraced all the transcending charms of this woman of matchless beauty, he thought within himself that no daring was too desperate and no measure too extreme for adoption on the part of one who would seek to gain that glorious prize!

"It is scarcely necessary for me to observe," he said after a pause, during which Venetia made a very evident gesture of impatience not unmingled with disgust at finding herself thus the object of his lustfully gloating looks: "it is scarcely necessary for me to observe," he said, "that I have too many reasons to fear that I am no special favourite with your ladyship—and yet I am one of your ladyship's most enthusiastic admirers."

"Your admiration, my lord, considering all that has taken place," she replied, with a deeply meaning look, "is little flattering to me."

"It is true, my dear Lady Sackville," he continued, totally unabashed, "that when inveigled into one of my mechanical chairs, you well-nigh paid the penalty of that curiosity which led you to penetrate into those private apartments——"

"Dare you allude to those chambers of infamy?" ejaculated Venetia, her eyes flashing fire. But, "Ah; my lord, I could have forgiven you for all that you thus attempted towards me: but when I think of how nearly that innocent girl——"

"I understand full well what you mean," interrupted Lord Leveson, with another malignant look: "and it is precisely because I do thus understand you, that I have taken it into my head to call upon your ladyship at the present moment. Of course, having been to Stratton Street, I am well aware——"

"We need not repeat things which are mutually known," suddenly interrupted Venetia. "Indeed, I am anxious that this interview should be cut as short as possible. State therefore the business that has brought you hither——"

"The explanation shall be given as curtly—and I may almost add as imperiously—as it is demanded," replied Lord Leveson.

"Speak, then!" ejaculated Venetia: "and trifle not with my time, which appears to be more precious than your's. What is the nature of your business?"

"The Marquis fixed his eyes with the steadiness of a firm resolution upon the glowing countenance of Venetia, who was now truly grand—truly magnificent in her haughty indignation: and in a slow, measured, and determined tone, he said, "My business here is to demand when it will suit Lady Sackville either to admit me to her boudoir as the partner of her couch, or to pass the night with me at Leveson House?"

A torrent of bitter reproaches and terrible invectives rose to the very tip of Venetia's tongue, as these words, so tremendously insulting, met her ear: but with an effort of surpassing energy, she suddenly stifled those syllables of rage and fury to which her lips were on the point of giving utterance. With the excruciating pang which that preterhuman effort caused her, she became deadly pale—and her bosom, a moment before heaving and falling with rapid palpitations, became instantaneously stilled, as if the proudly swelling globes had suddenly changed into that alabaster which they resembled.

"And are you base enough—are you vile enough, to use the means in your power, in order to enforce a response favourable to your wishes?" she asked, her eyes now burning with a lurid light as they were fixed steadfastly upon him.

"If the sacrifice of my soul were at stake," responded the Marquis, "I would not abandon this proceeding of love and vengeance. Ah!" he cried, with a gloating and yet malignant look, "I hate you as much as I adore you! Your beauty ravishes me—enchants me—drives me mad; and I would surrender all hopes of heaven for one hour of bliss and pleasure in your arms. But on the other hand, think you that I have not a vengeance to wreak for that terrible explosion of wrath, fury, and invective which you poured upon me on the occasion when you plunged me into the prisonage of that chair from which I was drivelling idiot enough to release you? Think you that I have forgotten the storm of reproaches—the tempest of upbraidings—which, though sweeping forth from the lips of an angel of beauty, were withering and blighting as if they came from the tongue of a hideous fiend? Oh! now, haughty beauty that you are—cunning intriguer that I have discovered you to be—I will revel in your charms and my very love my vengeance!"

Venetia remained calm and immovable as Lord Leveson thus assailed her with all the lashing, scourging power of the language of menace; but, still the lurid light shone in her eyes and it was evident that her composure was of that terrible kind which is produced by utter desperation. At length, when the Marquis had done speaking, her lips wavered for a moment: but no words came forth—they were stifled as it were in her very throat. But suddenly recollecting what she had for the last few minutes forgotten—namely, that Sir Douglas Huntingdon heard all that passed and had promised to rescue her, she experienced an instantaneous buoyancy of spirit and a brightening up of the countenance: for the thought now struck her that she might not only be saved from the embraces of that loathsome old man, but also revenged upon him for this and other wrongs.

Again there was a wavering of her lips: and this time the words which she meant to speak came forth.

"To-morrow night," she said, in a low deep tone, "at eleven o'clock punctually I will call at Leveson House. But, my lord, as my reputation is now to be placed completely in your power, may I hope that it will be held sacred?"

"However great a villain a man may be in his endeavours to obtain possession of a woman," answered the Marquis, "he does not usually trumpet forth his success. And as for the revenge which I cherish against you it will be fully wreaked when you sink a victim into the arms of my consummated desires. Therefore, as a nobleman, as a gentleman, and as a man, I swear by everything solemn and sacred, that the secret of your surrender shall be retained in my breast as inviolably and profoundly as if it reposed only with the dead."

Having thus spoken, the Marquis of Leveson made a low bow—turned abruptly away—and quitted the boudoir.

Sir Douglas Huntingdon now emerged from behind the screen. Venetia, pale—marble pale—with concentrated passion—trembling from head to foot—and with her fair hands firmly clenched, had risen from the sofa and was standing before the looking-glass, surveying herself with evident astonishment at the violence of her own emotions as expressed in her countenance.

"It is not worth while to expend so much splendid indignation upon such a wretch," observed Sir Douglas Huntingdon, taking her hand, which she now willingly abandoned to him. "To-morrow

night you shall go to Leveson House: but I will follow you hither. A few minutes after you have entered, will I present myself at the door and demand admission. If it be refused, I will enforce it: and when once confronted with the Marquis, I will threaten him with the fullest exposure of his conduct towards Ariadne, unless he solemnly undertakes to observe eternal peace and silence with regard to you."

"Now you are indeed my best—my dearest friend," said Venetia, gazing tenderly upon the Baronet.

"Ah! would that I could again induce you to believe that I love you—and you alone?" he murmured, pressing her hand to his lips.

"Yes—I shall esteem your conduct of to-morrow night as a proof of love," observed Venetia, her look now assuming an expression of soft wantonness: "and any reward that you may claim—"

"I understand you, dearest," cried the Baronet joyfully: and flinging his arms around her, he pressed his lips to her's in one long delicious kiss.

A minute afterwards the Baronet quitted the boudoir.

CHAPTER CI.

THE GLASS-DOOR.

Passing down the long passage into which opened the various apartments allotted to Lord and Lady Sackville, Sir Douglas Huntingdon reached the principal landing—when it suddenly struck him that as he had not been at Carlton House for nearly ten days, he ought to pay his respects to the Prince, if only for a few moments. For he recollected that the Baronet was one of George's boon companions; and his Royal Highness being excessively touchy and remarkably sensitive on certain points, would have felt annoyed on learning that Sir Douglas had been to the place and quitted it again without seeing him. The Baronet accordingly asked a page who stood on the principal landing, where his Royal Highness was and how engaged?

"His Royal Highness, sir," was the reply, "not many minutes since passed this way along the passage, towards the saloon at the end; and I believe that his Royal Highness is at this moment alone there."

"Then I will seek him in that apartment," said the Baronet: and turning

upon his heel he proceeded along the passage.

The page offered no farther remark, much less any remonstrance, as he knew that Sir Douglas was not only most intimate with the Prince, but enjoyed, so to speak, the "run of the palace."

At the end of the long passage was the ante-chamber with the glass door at which Sir Douglas and Venetia had first exchanged tender looks, on that special occasion when the Prince diverted himself with certain young and nobly-born ladies in the magnificent saloon with which that glass-door communicated. Traversing the ante-chamber, the Baronet at once entered the saloon, which as we have before stated, was furnished in the most luxurious style, and was decorated by numerous chandeliers and lamps.

Closing behind him the glass-door with the Crimson blinds, Sir Douglas looked around in expectation of beholding his Royal Highness: but the Prince was not there. Indeed, the Baronet saw no one: and he was about to retreat, when he noticed that a side door stood open. His acquaintance with Carlton House was so intimate that he knew full well that this door was a secret one communicating with a staircase having a private outlet towards the park: and indeed the Baronet himself had frequently been present at scenes in the magnificent saloon to which that convenient mode of communication had furnished the accessories of frail female beauty.

Seeing, therefore, this little door now standing open, the Baronet immediately felt assured that some pleasant diversion or intrigue was in progress; and for a moment he felt disposed to wait and see whether he should be "one too many," in the expected pastime. But recent events had somewhat steadied his character and sobered his inclinations: and on second thoughts he resolved to retreat from the danger of being lured into some scene of licentiousness or debauch. He accordingly withdrew, closing the glass door with the crimson blinds. But obedient to some sudden impulse of curiosity, he lingered for a moment to peep back into the saloon just to see whether the Prince was returning. At that same instant the figure of a man emerged from the secret door-way on the opposite side of the saloon; and to his unspeakable amazement, Sir Douglas Huntingdon instantaneously recognised the man whom he had first encountered at the *Jolly Waggoner's*, and whom Nell Gibson

had afterwards described to him as being the Public Executioner!

So stupefied was Sir Douglas Huntingdon on observing this man in Carlton House, that he was transfixed as it were to the spot,—his looks still plunging through the glass-door into the saloon. Immediately behind the Hangman followed the Prince,—his Royal Highness having lingered for a few moments in the rear to fasten the door at the foot of the staircase, which had a secret spring known only to himself and a few of his most intimate friends, male and female.

Mr. Daniel Coffin was not only attired in his Sunday's best, but had evidently endeavoured to make himself look as smart and as respectable as possible. Nevertheless nothing could materially mitigate the hangdog expression of his countenance; and the Baronet could perceive that the Prince, though endeavouring to maintain an air of dignified humour was profoundly disgusted at being in the company of such a man.

Sir Douglas Huntingdon was determined, if possible, to ascertain what earthly business the Prince Regent of the Kingdom could have to transact with the Public Executioner. The liveliest curiosity had seized upon the Baronet; and at any risk of discovery as an eaves-dropper, was he resolved to gratify it. Seeing by the manner in which the Prince stopped short in the middle of the saloon and leant against a chair, that he intended to hold his interview with the Hangman in that apartment, Sir Douglas kept his post at the glass-door; through which he could obtain a view of all that passed: and by cautiously and gently opening in the least possible distance, he was enabled to overhear the greater portion of the conversation which transpired.

"Now, my man," said the Prince, "be so good as to tell me at once what it is you want with me. I received—with how much astonishment I leave you to guess—the precious specimen of orthography and penmanship which you sent me, begging this interview——"

"Yes—and I received too the private message your Royal Highness sent by a gentleman in plain clothes," observed the Hangman; "and I felt very much obliged at being told that I might come here on this day and at this hour, to have the honour of talking to your Highness——"

"Well, now you are here," observed the Prince with ill-concealed impatience: "and the sooner you explain your business the better."

"If your Royal Highness means me to speak in such a hurry," observed Coffin, "I shall be so flurried——"

"Well, take your own time, then," exclaimed the Prince, throwing himself in the chair upon the back of which he had been leaning; "and I will listen to you as patiently as I can."

"Well, my lord—I mean Royal Highness—you must let me go back to the beginning," resumed the Hangman, "You know that day when you and Lady Ernestina Dysart found me locked fast in that queer-fashioned chair at Leveson House; and then your Royal Highness told me that if I would help you and her ladyship in the scheme you had in hand to get rid of Mrs. Dysart, you would give me a couple of hundred guineas. Of course I snapped at the bargain. Two hundred guineas wasn't to be sneezed at; and then too, you promised that the Sheriff should be empowered to offer a free pardon to any man who would accept the office of Jack Ketch. All this suited me uncommon well and on the day of execution I transmogrified myself into a black fellow, so as to mix unknown and unrecognized in the crowd. All went on right enough: the Sheriff made the proclamation and I volunteered. My eyes! what a shout the people gave!—how frightened they was of being baulked of the hanging-show!—and I dare say they felt uncommon grateful to the blessed institutions of this country that always ensure them Kings, or Prince Regents, or Queens, that are fond of sending their subjects to be tucked up like dogs."

"Spare your comments, fellow," interrupted the Prince, sternly: "and proceed with what you have to say—though for the life of me I cannot understand why you are recapitulating all these incidents."

"Well, my lord—I mean Royal Highness," again resumed Coffin, not exactly heeding the last comment of the Prince, "when once reinstated in my pleasant office of Public Executioner, I went into Dysart's cell and helped your's and Lady Ernestina's scheme most admirably. I plumed Dysart that I had seen the reprieve—heard it read—and had particularly marked the private instructions which directed that it was not to be produced until the very moment the drop was ready to fall. In fact, I did what you told me—which was to buoy him up with hope until the very last, so as not to allow any suspicion to enter his mind or any misgiving to excite a vindictive feeling. So

you may thank me, my lord—I mean Royal Highness—and Lady Ernestina too may thank me for amusing Dysart's mind in such a way that he did not see through the trick at the very last and blurt forth to the sheriffs or the chaplain all about your Royal Highness's amour with his wife and about the written document you so solemnly signed. For even if you had not told the Home Secretary, as I suppose you did, to write an official letter to the Sheriff of London about preventing *last dying speeches* on the scaffold, I should have been able to have managed the business all pleasant enough for you, and have eased Dysart's journey out of the world as comfortably as possible."

"Now I conceive you must have brought your long narrative to a conclusion," said the Prince, "and perhaps you will tell me why you have entered into all these particulars——"

"Just to show your Royal Highness how faithfully I behaved," responded the Hangman, with a tone, and manner of coarse effrontery, "and how well I followed out all your instructions."

"I do not deny it," observed the Prince, to whom it was gall and wormwood to permit the prolongation of the interview; "but did I not remit you the two hundred guineas which I promised by the hands of a confidential valet—the same who called upon you yesterday?"

"There's no denying that the two hundred guineas came safe enough," returned the Hangman, "but on mature reflection, I can't help thinking my services were but indifferently paid. If it had been a commoner or even a lord who had employed me, well and good: but for a Royal Highness—a Prince Regent—almost a King and Defender of the Faith into the bargain, as the inscription on the money says—to give such a paltry fee as two hundred guineas——"

"You scoundrel," exclaimed the Prince, now goaded to an intolerable degree of excruciation, "how dare you thus pollute all the sacred names of Royalty?"

"I have no doubt," observed the Hangman, his own effrontery becoming all the more coolly determined and doggedly resolute in proportion as he perceived that the Prince grew excited—because in his heart, like the millions of the people, he had a natural and bitter hatred against everything belonging to Monarchy and Royalty,—"I have no doubt," he said "that you think I am precious free and precious impudent: but it matters deuced little to me what you do think. Perhaps

you will tell me I am a thief? I should very soon answer that you, who wring the last farthing out of the people in the shape of taxation to support your luxuries and debaucheries, are quite as much a robber in your way——"

"Enough of this," cried the Prince, deeply humiliated and bitterly repenting the day when he placed himself in the power of such a diabolical ruffian. "What is it you require of me—what do you want?"

"Well," returned the Hangman, unable to resist the opportunity for another jest, "I might in reason ask your Royal Highness to create me a Duke or a Marquis—for there's many a man quite as bad as I am raised to the Peerage for doing the dirty work of Royalty. But my tastes don't exactly go that way. I like money better than titles——"

"Ah! then you want money?" said the Prince, eagerly catching at the means of getting rid of this dreadful visitor.

"Well, I should have thought you might long ago have guessed this much. This fact is," continued Coffin, "I am going to scrape together as much money as I possibly can get, for the purpose of emigrating to America——"

"Oh! then I shall cheerfully assist you," exclaimed the Prince, the sudden relief which this announcement gave him, producing an expression of joy upon his features. "How much do you require?"

"Well, I don't think your Royal Highness could expect me to do with less than five hundred guineas——"

"You shall have that amount," said the Prince "but I cannot give it you now. In a few days you may rely upon receiving it. But how is it to be conveyed to you? I cannot send my valet to your residence any more: it compromises me too much in his eyes. Nor can I allow you to come hither again: the risk of your being observed is too great——"

"Well, if your Royal Highness will only tell me the when, the where, and the how," said the Hangman, "I will be punctual."

"I have it! exclaimed the Prince; an idea has struck me! Lady Ernestina Dysart is so deeply mixed up in this business, that she must help me in it."

"Ah! to be sure," observed Coffin: "your Royal Highness can send her to meet me somewhere and hand me over the money."

"This day week—at eleven o'clock at night—and on Westminster Bridge," said the Prince Regent. "Be that the appointment."

"Well and good," rejoined the Hangman. "But to make it more definite, suppose we say that Lady Ernestina, or whoever you may send, will find me seated in the recess over the middle arch, on the left hand side of the bridge as you cross it."

"It is a bargain," observed the Prince. "And now you may leave me."

Daniel Coffin accordingly retired by the private staircase, the Prince following him to unfasten the door at the bottom.

We need hardly inform our readers that Sir Douglas Huntingdon was so astounded—so amazed—by all he had just heard, that he could scarcely believe the evidence of his own senses. If he had occasionally failed to catch a few words here and there, in the preceding colloquy, he had nevertheless heard the greater portion—enough indeed to make the whole tremendous episode in the Prince's career perfectly plain to his comprehension. That his Royal Highness should have so deeply committed himself with such a man as Daniel Coffin, was more than enough to confound the Baronet and stagger his belief. Indeed, as he moved slowly away from the glass-door, at the conclusion of the scene, he asked himself, "Is this a reality, or is it a vision?—am I awake, or walking in my sleep."

Quitting the anti-chamber, threading the long passage, and crossing the landing once more, the Baronet wended his way back to Venetia's boudoir—on entering which, he found her alone, reclining on the sofa and wrapped in profound meditation.

"I have returned," said the Baronet, "simply because I may have an alteration to make in our proceedings of to-morrow night. Something has occurred which is suggestive of a change of tactics, placing indeed the principal inmates of Leveson House more completely in my power than ever. But I shall not now trouble you with explanations, Venetia: suffice it for you to know that you shall not only baffle the Marquis, but likewise behold him so deeply humiliated that he shall throw himself at your feet in an agony of terror—a grovelling, servile, miserable wretch!"

Oh! if you can accomplish all this," exclaimed Venetia, her countenance, a few moments before so pensive, now lighting up with joy,—“you know not how happy you will render me, and how deeply, deeply grateful I shall prove.”

"Fear not, dear Venetia," responded the Baronet, "that I shall fail in accomplishing all I promise. Indeed," he added with a look of profound and tender mean-

ing, "the reward held out is sufficient to excite me to even superhuman exertions in your cause."

"And that reward shall not be withheld," murmured Venetia, bending down her blushing countenance.

The compact was sealed with a fond embrace; and Sir Douglas Hunnington took his departure.

CHAPTER CII.

THE ROYAL BROTHER AND SISTER.

About an hour after the occurrences just related the Prince Regent received a pressing note from his sister the Princess Sophia, begging that he would call upon her as soon as possible. Her Royal Highness occupied apartments in St. James's Palace: and thither the Prince accordingly repaired.

We have stated in a preceding chapter that the Princess Sophia was now about thirty-eight years of age—of luxuriant embonpoint and of very handsome countenance. But the traces of deep care were visible upon her features; and without rising from her chair in the elegant apartment where she received her brother, the royal lady bade him in a languid tone place himself near her, as she wished to consult him on a matter of the utmost importance.

The ladies who were in attendance upon the Princess, had withdrawn in obedience to a sign which she made on the entrance of her brother; and this circumstance, together with the deep melancholy which appeared in Sophia's manner, and the look of mingled mystery and hesitation with which she regarded him, proved that it was indeed some affair of more than usual importance that had induced her thus to send for him.

"Has anything unpleasant occurred?" asked the Prince, who was conscious of so many misdeeds of his own and so many errors and frailties on the part of every member of his family that he was always apprehensive of detection, exposure or retribution.

"Nothing has occurred that need give you any particular annoyance," replied the Princess; then after a few moments' pause during which the colour went and came upon her cheeks even under the artificial bloom which a cosmetic shed thereon, she continued to observe, "The advice which I seek at your hands especially regards my own happiness."

"And yet you seem afraid of speak-out-right," remarked the Prince, somewhat impatiently.

"Yes," said the Princess Sophia, her eyes filling with tears; "because it is a painful thing for a sister to speak to a brother of her frailty and her shame."

"For heaven's sake explain yourself!" exclaimed the Prince, starting uneasily, and then fixing a penetrating look upon his sister. "Would you have me understand that you have *again* formed some connexion which is likely to threaten you with disgrace and dishonour?"

"No, no!" returned the princess, hastily and almost indignantly. "It is concerning the secret of my early years that I would speak to you—a secret that has so long been known to you——"

"Yes—the affair in the Edgeware Road," interrupted the Prince. But what danger threatens to transpire therefrom? Lady Florimel surely has not betrayed you?

"Lady Florimel is the most admirable of women," exclaimed the Princess; "and I believe that she would die to serve me. It is not my secret that is menaced, but my happiness that is deeply, deeply compromised—that is to say, such little happiness as circumstances have permitted me to retain from the wreck of all the generous feelings, fervid affections, and buoyant hopes of youth."

"And so long as your secret is safe," observed the Prince, somewhat disgusted with the sentimentalism now exhibited by his sister, "why the devil should you be unhappy?"

"Unhappy!" she echoed, with a bitter laugh. "Should I not be something less or something more than woman, were I really and truly happy? Or think you, George, that I can possibly blind myself to the fact that our family—the Royal Family of England—is rapidly becoming an object of loathing, hatred, and scorn to the great masses of the community? Is it not said openly that our unhappy sire has gone mad through remorse at his own crimes and anguish at the misdeeds of his children? Has it not been even more than hinted that our brother Earnest was the murderer of Sellis? And you will excuse me for reminding you, my dear George, that the press has been recently more busy than ever with *your* name——"

"A truce to all this recapitulation of evils!" exclaimed his Royal Highness suddenly. "You are in a melancholy mood, Sophia—your spirits are depressed—and therefore you are giving way to the gloomiest forebodings. Was it to entertain

me with your miseries and make me as miserable as yourself, that you have sent for me hither ?

"How unkind of you to speak thus!" cried the unhappy Princess, bursting into tears: for the conduct of her brother on the present occasion seemed more than usually heartless, especially as she herself was more than ever in need of affectionate sympathy.

"Well, well," said the Prince, somewhat softening towards his sister; "tell me what advice you seek at my hands, or what service you require of me."

"Listen to me patiently for a few minutes, and you will then understand wherefore I am thus unhappy," said the Princess, wiping the tears from her eyes. "You are aware, dear George," she continued, with looks slightly averted—as if she dared not meet his gaze while touching upon the present topic, "you are aware that upwards of nineteen years have now elapsed since I became a mother. The babe was entrusted to a surgeon of the name of Thurston—the same who has since risen to such eminence and acquired so great a renown as a physician. About two months ago, yielding to an irresistible impulse, I called upon Lady Florimel and besought her to institute inquiries relative to the fate of that son whom from its very birth I had thus abandoned to the care of strangers. My dear friend Pauline at once undertook the commission; and she called upon Doctor Thurston, from whose lips she learnt that the child had been stolen in its infancy. Indeed, it was in the month of June, 1795, when the child was between five and six months old, that it was thus stolen from the arms of its nurse in Hyde Park. Doctor Thurston knows that the child was mine—has known it indeed for a very long time; but he has kept the secret inviolable. His honesty—his integrity—in this respect, at once convinced Pauline that he was telling the truth when he stated that the child had been stolen. Moreover, he showed her a printed hand-bill which was circulated at the time, bearing the date I just now mentioned, and offering a reward for the recovery of the child. Lady Florimel was, as you may suppose, profoundly grieved for my sake on hearing such terrible intelligence from Doctor Thurston: but she nevertheless deemed it her duty to report the whole truth to me. What my feelings have since been I shall not attempt to describe: suffice it to say that while picturing the most horrible destinies for the unhappy progeny of my youthful weakness, I have

looked upon myself as the most unnatural of mothers! But in the meantime—since that interview between Lady Florimel and Doctor Thurston—the head officer of Bow Street has been employed by the Physician to discover if possible some trace of the lost one—."

"Ah! Lawrence Sampson," ejaculated the Prince. "He is a clever fellow: But I hope that Thurston did not entrust him with your secret?"

"No," said the Princess: Doctor Thurston represented that it was his own child who had been lost. And this Mr. Sampson has succeeded not only in discovering that the lost one is alive, but also where he is and the manner he has been brought up."

Here the Princess Sophia burst into a flood of tears; and her voice was choked with the convulsive sobs that rent her bosom.

"Where is the boy?" inquired the Prince; and in what sphere of life has he been trained? I am afraid that you have nothing very satisfactory to impart on this point——"

"Good heavens! what a dreadful idea is it for a mother to contemplate!" exclaimed the Princess, wringing her hands in bitterest anguish; but suddenly regaining the fortitude of despair, she dashed the tears from her eyes, and turning her looks steadfastly upon her brother, said in a deep and solemn tone, "My son—the offspring of my early crime—has been trained amongst the vilest of the vile—dragged through all mire, feculence, and corruption of demoralization—inured to depravity—steeped to the very crown of his head in all moral abominations and now O God! that a mother's tongue should have to proclaim so hideous a fact: and now, I say, he is in the service of a man who occupies the basest, the most loathed, scorned, and abhorred position that is to be found at the bottom of the social scale——"

"To whom do you allude?" demanded the Prince, who in spite of his intense selfishness and his cold blooded indifference to the sorrows of others, could not help being somewhat touched by the spectacle of his sister's dread despair, as likewise by the appalling interest that belonged to this narrative which she was reciting:—"who is the man that you thus speak of as being the master or employer of the lad?"

The Princess Sophia turned upon her brother a look full of unutterable misery, as she said in a low and scarcely audible

tone, "Who is that man?—it is the Public Executioner!"

"What, Daniel Coffin!" ejaculated the Prince, the mention of the dreadful man appearing ominous to a degree inasmuch as but little more than an hour had elapsed since he and his Royal Highness had stood face to face in the splendid saloon at Carlton House. "This fellow now seems destined to spring up frequently in my path," thought the Prince within himself; and the feelings of disgust, annoyance and even alarm which he thus experienced, were reflected in his countenance.

"Oh! you may well be horrified and terror-stricken!" exclaimed the Princess, not altogether comprehending the spring of her brother's emotions; for she was of course utterly unaware of the fact that the Common Hangman was personally known to the Prince Regent of the Kingdom.

"But what do you propose to do in the matter?" demanded his Royal Highness: "or what do you wish or expect that I should do for you?"

"Hear me out—and then you will understand wherefore I have sent for you. For nearly two months," continued the Princess, "has Doctor Thurston been aware that the unfortunate youth is alive and in the service of that dreadful man but not until yesterday had the physician the courage to communicate to Lady Florimel the result of Mr. Lawrence Sampson's researches. Indeed, it was only when Pauline threatened to call personally upon the Bow Street officer and ascertain whether anything was being done in the matter—it was only then, I say that Doctor Thurston admitted that Sampson's efforts had already been crowned—too fatally crowned—with the success. And now, it would also appear that by a singular coincidence Mr. Sampson, *before* being engaged in that research at all, had fallen in with the youth—had conceived an interest in his behalf—had invited him to his house—and had done all he could to reclaim him from the ways of vice. But although the endeavour seemed to prosper for a few days, those favourable symptoms speedily disappeared; and alas! the youth returned to his old companions, and no doubt to his old habits. All these things did Lady Florimel succeed in glean—*or rather extorting*—from Doctor Thurston's lips yesterday; and this day has she revealed to them to me!"

"Then if the youth is so inveterate in his bad habits," observed the Prince, "the best thing will be to leave him where he is."

"How can you recommend such a course?" cried the Princess, in a voice of bitter remonstrance.

"How could you have abandoned him for more than nineteen years?" demanded the Prince coolly.

"Oh! now I am indeed righteously rewarded for my unnatural conduct!"—and as the Princess thus spoke in a voice of rending anguish, she again burst into a flood of tears, at the first outpouring of which her brother made a movement of impatience. "Unnatural mother that I have been," she continued, after a long pause: "most richly, do I deserve every reproach—every taunt—every imputation that can be thrown against me! Nevertheless, it is cruel indeed to receive this chastisement at the hands of a brother!"

"Well, perhaps I was a little harsh," said the Prince Regent; "but do pray tell me at once and without any farther circumlocution, what I can do for you—what you require at my hands?"

"Of all my brothers, *you* only," said the Princess, "are acquainted with my secret: and therefore, in the first place it was natural I should confide to your ears all that I have learnt concerning my boy. In the second place, you alone—as Prince Regent—have the power to snatch that unhappy youth away from the career of degradation and depravity which he is pursuing—"

"Sophia!" exclaimed the Prince, bending a stern look upon his sister,—"am I to understand that you propose to place this youth about your person—to have him near you—and make him aware of the secret of his birth?"

"I mean nothing of all this," returned the Princess. "But I wish him to be rescued from that den of infamy where he now is, and to be placed in some honourable position: I wish him to be removed from that grade of life where he is constantly liable to be either tempted or necessitated to do evil! In a word, I wish that he may have a chance and opportunity given him to retrieve his character and to become an honest member of society,"

"But how, in the devil's name," cried the Prince impatiently, "am I to accomplish all this? Would you have me send for him—tell him I have heard of his merits—and at once appoint him to the post of valet in my household? Such an idea is ridiculous: he would be coming to my bed-chamber in the middle of the night to cut my throat—"

"Cruel—heartless brother!" shrieked

forth the Princess Sophia: "you are speaking of my own son!"

"And a pretty son, it seems by all accounts, you have allowed him to grow up," retorted the Prince, brutally. Come, come—let us have no more whining, crying and whimpering on this point. What you have permitted the boy to become, so he must remain."

"Never!" ejaculated the Princess, starting from her seat and flinging glances of fiery indignation upon the Prince Regent. "No—by heaven!" she exclaimed: "I will sooner peril discovery and run the risk of disgrace, than allow that boy to remain in the vile companionship to which he has been too long abandoned! My conduct as a mother has been execrable to a degree; and I swear that some atonement shall be made now! Assist me if you will: and if not, then disguised in humble apparel, I will myself visit the abode of infamy and horror where that poor boy now dwell!"

"You are mad, Sophia—you are mad!" exclaimed the Prince, in mingled anger and alarm. "Such a proceeding on your part would be attended with the most serious risks: indeed, discovery would be almost inevitable—and if you are once in the power of such a desperate villain as the Public Executioner," he added bitterly, "God help you!"

"Then, George—dear George," said the Princess, the excitement of anger suddenly experiencing a complete re-action as she saw the truth of her brother's reasoning.—although she little conjectured how *feelingly* he spoke relative to the Hangman,—*"pray assist me to save this boy from utter ruin! Succour me to rescue him ere it be too late! Conceive—only fancy the horror—the ineffable, illimitable horror—that would seize upon my soul were he to be drawn into some crime that would send him to the scaffold. Oh! if my feelings now prompt me to extend a helping hand towards him, what would they do in such a case as that?—should I not be goaded by desperation to dare everything—exposure, dishonour, ridicule, scorn? George—my dear brother!"* she exclaimed, throwing herself at his feet and clasping her hands wildly. "listen. I beseech thee to the prayer of a penitent woman—an agonizing mother—assist me to save my son!"

"Rise, Sophia—rise," said the Prince, somewhat moved again by the spectacle of his sister's highly wrought anguish. "I will see what can be done in the matter. If the Habeas Corpus was suspended just at this moment, I would soon manage the thing by having him seized—locked up—

and subjected to some reformatory process. As it is, I may have him kidnapped and put on board a ship bound for the colonies—taking care to provide for him a good situation on his landing in Canada, Jamaica or New South Wales just as the case may be."

"You will consider the matter—you will reflect upon it well?" said the Princess. "But promise me two things."

"Name them," observed his Royal Highness; "and then I will give you my answer."

"In the first place," rejoined Sophia "promise me that no step shall be taken in the matter without my knowledge and concurrence; and in the second place you must pledge yourself that before the boy quits England for ever, you will by some means or other procure me an opportunity of seeing him for a moment—at some place and under such circumstances as to preclude the possibility of my being recognized by any one."

"And if I do all this for you," said the Prince, after a long pause, during which he remained buried in a deep reverie—"if I do all this for you; I say, will you undertake to do a certain service for me?"

"Oh! yes," exclaimed the Princess Sophia, well pleased at beholding the affair assume the appearance of a bargain; because she knew enough of her brother's selfish disposition to be aware that he was much more likely to do her a favour when he required one in return, than he would be if the obligation were all one side. "Tell me what service you require at my hands—tell me what I can do for you—"

"By one of the inscrutable impulses of nature," said the Prince his look suddenly assuming more of what may be termed a religious seriousness than for years past it had ever been accustomed to put on; "your maternal feelings Sophia, have been touched—and evidently to some depth. Whether it be curiosity to behold one's offspring—Whether it be some intuitive promoting of latent love—or whether it be one of these impulses which have their origin in a moment of the heart's weakness, I cannot say: but not the less certain is it that I have more than once experienced, within the last year or two, a similar feeling to that which has this day manifested itself in you."

"What mean you, my dear brother?" inquired the Princess.

"I will soon explain myself," he continued. "In the same way that you experienced a desire to behold your son, even if it be only for a single moment—so am I influenced by an earnest—longing to cast

my eyes, if only for a moment likewise, upon my daughter! You knew full well that Florence Eaton—the niece of Lord and Lady Florimel—is my own child—the daughter of that Octavia Pauline's sister, whom I loved with so profound an adoration!"

"But Florence knows not that you are her father," observed the Princess, gently.

"No—nor is it necessary that she should—not a whit more necessary than that your son should be made aware that you are his mother. You are intimate with the Florimels," continued the Regent, "and you can so manage matters that some day—for a few moments—my daughter may appear in my presence and speak to me, although without being aware that she is my daughter!"

"Do you not know, George, that your name is seldom—very seldom mentioned in the presence of Pauline?—for her husband and her friends are ever fearful of reviving the memory of her dead sister."

"Yes—and also because the Florimels regard me as the destroyer of poor Octavia's health, happiness, and life," added the Prince, in a mournful tone and for an instant he seemed as if remorse had touched his heart—for an expression of unutterable anguish suddenly swept over his countenance, "But it will not be necessary for me and the Florimels to meet," he added immediately; "do you arrange matters in such a way that I may see my daughter for a few moments—that I may hear her voice—that I may compare her with the image of her mother, who is gone—and that, in a word, I may have the satisfaction of beholding my child, although I may not announce myself as her father, but must coldly retain my character as her Prince and the representative of the Sovereign. Do this for me, Sophia—pledge yourself to gratify me in that respect—and I will perform for you all that you have asked in reference to your son."

"It is a compact between us," said the Princess. "To-morrow I will see Pauline upon this subject."

"And I, on my part," rejoined the Prince, "will lose no time in deliberating on the best way to accomplish all you desire in respect to your son."

The brother and sister then separated—the former returning to Carlton House—and the latter remaining in her own apartment at St. James's Palace, to ponder upon the many, many things which sate heavy upon her mind.

THE BARONET AND THE HANGMAN.

On the following day, between two and three o'clock in the afternoon, Mr. Daniel Coffin was sitting on the step of his shop-door, smoking a long pipe, and conversing with a neighbour who was doing precisely the same on the opposite side of Fleet Lane. Jack the Foundling was in his own room, reading the history of Dick Turpin: Sally Melmoth was attending to her household duties; and Dick had gone out to pass an hour or two at some skittle ground. Mr. Coffin was therefore "minding the shop," although he had very few customers at that time of the day, and would much rather have been without them altogether,—the shop being, as we have before informed our readers, a mere "blind" to serve as an ostensible source of income in addition to his official gains and perquisites as hangman.

What the conversation was about which he was carrying on with his neighbour, we do not propose to describe: suffice it to say that it was all of a sudden cut short by an ejaculation of mingled astonishment and alarm on the part of Daniel Coffin, as he beheld Sir Douglas Huntingdon ascending the lane.

The reader will not fail to comprehend how it was that the Hangman's equanimity was disturbed for a moment on beholding the Baronet: for there was not only the adventure at Shooter's Hill in which Mr. Coffin was implicated, but there was likewise the grave episode of the fire;—and far more serious still, there was the murder of Nell Gibson. But the Hangman possessed, as we have frequently shown, a wondrous amount of presence of mind: and no sooner were his apprehensions conceived than by a rapid chain of reasoning he set them at rest once more.

"If the Baronet had meant to be nasty about the Shooter's Hill affair, he would have done something at once and not let a dozen days elapse like this. The same may be said about the fire at his house, and moreover any lawyer would tell him that he could not prove it was me and my pals that did it. Then as for the groom—no one can say but what he was burnt alive; for who would think he had been knocked on the head first? Lastly, it is out of all question for anybody to suspect that Nell Gibson has been made away with, except those who did it. So the Baronet can't be coming with the intention of doing me any harm—that's positive!"

Such were the thoughts which swept through the brain of Daniel Coffin; although at the same time he would much rather that Sir Douglas Huntingdon had not made his appearance in Fleet Lane at all—for when a person's conscience is not very pure, a shadow will sometimes disturb it.

"Well, Mr. Coffin," said the Baronet, pausing in front of the shop with a good-tempered look; "I have come to pay you a visit, you see."

"So I see indeed," returned the Hangman, with a grim smile: "but I hope there's no ill-feeling between us on account of what took place down yonder some little time back."

"Ah! you mean the affair at the Jolly Waggoner's and then at Shooter's Hill?" said the Baronet, who, be it understood, did not know who were the authors of the conflagration of his house. "Well, I no doubt ought to owe you a little grudge for that proceeding on your part; but as I came out of it safe and sound I will say nothing more on the subject. The truth is, I wish to speak to you on another little matter."

"Walk in sir," exclaimed the Hangman not only well pleased at finding that he was really free from danger, but also suspecting that the individual who had once stood the chance of being made a victim was now come as a patron or employer. "Walk in, sir—and if you don't like to talk in the shop, you can step into my parlour—where" he added with another grim smile, "you shall be sure of good treatment."

"Oh! we can talk very well in the shop," returned the Baronet, glancing around, "since there is no one here but ourselves—and I presume we are secure against eaves-droppers?"

"Perfectly so" rejoined the Hangman, "And now, won't you sit down, sir, and make yourself quite at home?"

The Baronet accordingly took a chair, while Daniel Coffin lounged against the mantle-piece anxiously awaiting the explanation of his visitor's business.

"I have reason to know," resumed Sir Douglas Huntingdon, fixing his eyes upon the executioner, "that you are not altogether unacquainted with the interior of Leveson House——"

"Ah! how the deuce did you discover that?" exclaimed the Coffin.

"Never mind how I came to know it," said the Baronet. "It is sufficient for our present purpose that I am acquainted with the fact; and what is more, I have reason

to believe that you are not altogether a stranger to those secret apartments in Leveson House one of which contains the curiously contrived arm-chairs."

"By goles?" cried the Hangman, "you seem to know all about it; and if you was ever caught in one of those chairs, you can perhaps judge how pleasant such captivity must be. But pray go on sir, with what you was saying."

"I wish to know," proceeded Sir Douglas, whether you would undertake to introduce yourself, at a particular hour into Leveson House, and there lie concealed behind the curtains in one of the secret apartments until such time as some signal to be previously agreed upon, should summon you forth?"

"There isn't a house in London that I can't introduce myself into somehow or another; and there isn't a door that I can't open by hook or by crook. But how am I to know," demanded the Hangman, "that all this mayn't be some plant on your part to get me into a scrape and revenge yourself for that little business down at Shooter's Hill?"

"The answer is easy, both to be given and to be understood," replied Sir Douglas, "If I really had the intention of punishing you, I should not condescend to devise a trap to ensnare you; nor should I beat about the bush in a manner alike unnecessary and ridiculous: but I should at once give you into custody, and allow the law to become my avenger. But for the sake of that young woman Ellen Gibson——"

"Ah! she is a nice young woman too, notwithstanding all her faults," observed the Hangman, with a diabolical hypocrisy. "We have quite forgiven her for having put you up to the dodge at the hut; because she handed us over the hundred guineas you sent us through her, and so all was right. Well, I am satisfied now on second thoughts, that you don't mean any treachery in getting me to Leveson House; beside which I always have at least a couple of barkers, and may be a dagger—with sometimes a bottle of vitriol—in my pocket, so that in any case," added Coffin with a grin of diabolical ferocity, "I should be rather a troublesome customer to grapple with. I think you would sooner catch a lion or a boa-constrictor without injury to yourself, than take me alive. A bullet in the brain—a dagger planted in the heart—or a bottle of vitriol smashed on the head——"

"Well, well," interrupted the Baronet, "you need not recapitulate all your modes of defence, because no injury is intended

you. The plain facts are these:—The Marquis of Leveson is manœuvring to get a certain lady into his power; and I wish to take this lady's part and compel his lordship to renounce all further pretensions or claims, if indeed he have any, in that respect. This can only be done by proving that enough is known concerning his niece, Lady Ernestina, to involve her in serious trouble. *You* are the man whose presence at Leveson House on the occasion will strike terror and dismay into the hearts of the guilty ones, and bring matters to an issue that will serve my purpose. Now, do you consent to enact this part in the proposed drama? If so, name your price and it shall be paid—half in ready cash as an earnest of good faith, and the other half when we meet at Leveson House."

The Hangman reflected in silence for a few minutes. According to his arrangement with the Prince Regent on the preceding day, it was most probable that Lady Ernestina Dysart would be the messenger whom his Royal Highness would send to keep the appointment on Westminster Bridge a week thence, and pay over the five hundred guineas. Would it be prudent then, for the Hangman to adopt a hostile course towards Lady Ernestina, and embark in any enterprise inimical to herself? *This* was the point which Coffin revolved in his mind. But then, on the other hand, here was Sir Douglas Huntingdon, no doubt ready to pay a handsome fee for the service he required: and Coffin was too avaricious and too greedy of gold not to snap at the present bait. Suddenly it struck him that by entering into a scheme thus hostile to Ernestina, it would positively and actually have the effect of rendering her all the more anxious to get him out of the country; and as he told the Prince that he wanted the five hundred guineas for the purpose of emigrating, her ladyship on learning that such was the case, would be all the more eager to supply him with the funds for his alleged departure. Besides, suppose that Ernestina should refuse to become the Prince's messenger on the night appointed for the payment of the money on Westminster Bridge, would not his Royal Highness entrust the matter to some other person? Most assuredly; for Daniel Coffin felt that the Prince would do anything rather than stand the chance of being troubled with farther visits from such a person as himself. All things thus considered, the Hangman resolved to accept Sir Douglas Huntingdon's proposal.

"Well, sir," he said, "I have just been thinking over the matter; and I don't see why I shouldn't earn a couple of hundred guineas in this way as well as another."

"From which remark," observed the Baronet, "I understand that you require two hundred guineas as your recompense?"

"Well, sir, I don't think I can do it for less. You see I shall have to get into Leveson House stealthily, as one may say—or at all events however I manage to get in, I shall have to creep about on the sly, and so stand the chance of being shot as a burglar."

"I do not object to the amount of the reward you ask," interrupted the Baronet.

"On the contrary, here are bank-notes and gold for a hundred guineas;" then having counted down the money, at the sight of which the Hangman's eyes twinkled with the sinister vibrations that are seen in those of a snake, Sir Douglas Huntingdon said, "It is for to night that your services are required. By eleven o'clock must you be concealed behind the draperies in one of the rooms belonging to the private suite; and when you hear me say *that the public executioner himself can bear testimony to the infamies of those chambers*, you must come forth from your hiding place."

"Then you will be there to night also?" said the Hangman inquiringly.

"I shall," returned the Baronet. "And now I think we understand each other fully?"

"We do so," rejoined the Hangman.

The Baronet then took his leave; and Daniel Coffin hastened to secure the hundred guineas in some secret place where he was wont to deposit his ill-gotten gains. Then for the rest of the afternoon and evening he assumed himself with smoking, drinking, and pondering upon the best means of obtaining ingress to Leveson House.

"It was about half past nine o'clock at night when he secured his pistols, dagger, skeleton-keys, dark lantern, and other burglarious apparatus, about his person; and enveloping himself in a capacious cloak, set off for the West End. It was half-past ten when he reached Aldermarle Street; and he walked two or three times up and down in front of Leveson House, in order to ascertain in how many rooms lights were burning, and whether there were many people going out and in—so that he might form an idea whether the house was tolerably quiet or not. The result of his

observation was that the mansion was remarkably tranquil; and on the front-door being opened to take in a letter, the Hangman's eyes plunging into the hall, observed no one loitering there except the porter himself. Accordingly, a minute or two after the messenger had delivered the letter, the Hangmen stepped boldly up to the front door and gave a sort of uncertain double knock, like the timid and hesitating summons of a poor tradesman.

The hall-porter immediately opened the door; whereupon Daniel Coffin with the coolest impudence imaginable, bestowed a familiar nod upon the official, as if to imply "that it was all right," and walked in without a word. The half-porter remembered to have seen that ill-looking face before: for indeed, if once viewed, it could not very well be forgotten. He had seen Coffin, he it remembered, on the night that he called to obtain an interview with Lady Ernestina Dysart, and also on the morning when he went thither relative to Ariadne. Besides as the porter was well aware that some queer characters occasionally visited Leavson House for the purpose of ministering to the intrigues of the Marquis in respect to the fair sex, he was by no means astonished at seeing such an ill-looking fellow as Coffin make his appearance there. Moreover, remembering his face, and observing the air of assurance with which he so coolly entered, the porter naturally supposed that he had come in pursuance of some appointment; and therefore he said not a word, but let him pass on.

This was precisely that Daniel Coffin had calculated upon; and traversing the hall, he ascended the stairs with all the self-sufficiency of a visitor who knew that he was expected. Fortune favoured his enterprise for he did not encounter a soul as he proceeded up the marble staircase, traversed the landing and sought the Crimson Drawing-Room. But had he met any of the dependents, he was prepared with some kind of subterfuge to explain his presence in the mansion.

Coffin had previously ascertained, from the observation he had made in the street, that there were lights in the Crimson Drawing Room—the situation of which apartment in the house he had experienced no trouble in recollecting, for the memory of the accomplished burglar is rendered keenly acute to all such details as these. The Hangman accordingly entered the drawing room, without the slightest hesitation; and he found it unoccupied and dark, as he had expected. By aid of the

keleton-keys, he at once entered the mysterious suite of apartments, which he had explored on the first occasion of his visit to Leveson House.

Here we must leave Mr. Daniel Coffin for a short time, and transfer the attention of the reader to another apartment in the same spacious and splendid mansion. The chamber to which we now introduce ourselves, is that of Lady Ernestina Dysart; and the beauteous but depraved occupant thereof as just retired thither, it being now nearly eleven o'clock.

But Lady Ernestina felt no inclination to seek her couch. Her naturally fervid temperament and strong passions had recently produced in her a certain restlessness and uneasiness, for which she herself could scarcely account. The consummate hypocrisy of her situation, not only compelling her to wear widow's weeds, but also to maintain the seclusion of a widow, served as it were as a retribution and a punishment. She had no opportunity of gratifying those longings which inspired her, nor of appeasing those passions which devoured her. Were she able to go out into society, how soon might she form a connexion of a tender nature; but cooped up as she was by the necessity of affecting to mourn for the death of that very husband whom she herself had been the means of sending to the scaffold, she was entombed in a seclusion that every day grew more and more intolerable. Her imagination was most purient and licentious—her disposition both fervid and depraved; and thus her passions, while unappeased, were like serpents gnawing at her vitals.

Hence was it that Lady Ernestina Dysart on the present occasion, experienced no inclination to retire to rest, she knew that her uncle the Marquis had some intrigue on hand; but what it was, or who its object might be, she was unaware. Nevertheless, the mere thought that an intrigue of such a nature was in progress beneath that roof, was sufficient to give such an impulse to her thoughts as to set her very imagination in a flame. In this morbid state of mind was it that she began to experience an irresistible longing to inspect once more, the sculptured and pictorial representations of love and pleasure with which her uncle's private gallery was filled.

Taking up a candle, Ernestina stealthily quitted her room and repaired to that bed-chamber whence there was a private door into the apartment containing the mechanical chairs. That this bed-chamber would no more be used by the Marquis of Leve-

son, she well knew : inasmuch as the terrible episode connected with Ariadne Varian had left such an impression upon his lordship's mind as to induce him to order that chamber to be shut up at least for the present Ernestina therefore felt confident that she ran no risk of discovery by proceeding that way; and locking the outer door after her, she traversed the chamber where poor Ariadne had passed through all the phases of her appalling trance !

Opening the door of the dressing-room by means of the secret spring, Ernestina proceeded into the room adjoining; and thence she passed into the gallery containing the sculptures and the pictures.

Carrying the wax candle in her hand she proceeded to examine the various groups of statuary and the splendid specimens of the limner's art: but the farther she advanced down the gallery, the more consuming became the passions that were excited in her bosom. Beneath the sable weeds of mourning raged the frenetic desires of a Bacchanal: the virgin white collar which covered her breast, rose and sank with the sensuous palpitations of the heaving globes beneath. Above her flushing countenance sate the widow's cap, of as snowy a purity as the collar upon her bosom: but instead of setting off to advantage a face where Christian resignation was blended with a soft melancholy, its vivid whiteness threw out in stronger contrast the cheeks that were thus crimsoned with the mantling glow of consuming desire. The heart of that woman was a volcano at this moment, as she gloated upon all refinements of sensuality that were scattered around.

Presently she paused before a mirror stretching from the floor to the ceiling, and reflecting every object in the gallery upon its polished surface. Heavy crimson draperies hung on each side of this mirror and festooned along the top: so that no gilded frame work was visible—and the effect thus produced was that of the prolongation of the gallery to a considerable length. Ernestina caught a glimpse of herself in this resplendent mirror, and was about to turn away when she was struck with the deep crimson of her countenance: and feeling the fires that were burning in her bosom she stood to observe their effect upon her features.

"The face," she thought within herself, "is too faithful a reflex of the human heart. Were any one to see me now, it would be impossible to prevent all my secret thoughts from being probed to the

very bottom! Ah! the countenance is indeed a tablet

But at this moment Ernestina gave a sudden start as if a viper had bitten her—and the colour fled from her cheeks as rapidly as darkness supervenes in a room at night when the candle is suddenly extinguished.

"For, as she stood gazing upon the mirror, she was struck with the sudden apparition of a figure stealing in from the door at the other extremity of the room: and a mortal terror at once seized upon the miserable woman, as she recognised the too well-known form and features of the Public Executioner!

CHAPTER CIV.

TERROR.

It was a wonder that Lady Ernestina did not drop the candle from her hand, but perhaps it was the convulsing horror that seized upon her entire frame that made her fingers grasp it with a spasmodic rigidity.

Scarcely had she caught that glimpse of the Hangman when he glided suddenly behind a curtain close by the door: and when he had thus disappeared from her view, Ernestina breathed more freely again. Terror loosened the iron grasp which it had fastened upon her, and she experienced a sudden relief on observing that the dreadful man was not coming to accost her then and there!

Calling all her presence of mind to her aid, she turned slowly and in a leisurely manner from the mirror, and took a seat in one of the superb chairs which were placed at intervals along the gallery. These chairs, he it understood, were *not* provided with any treacherous mechanism; and Ernestina thus sat down not so much to collect her thoughts as because the sudden terror she had just experienced made her limbs feel heavy and had stricken her as it were with the numbness of sore fatigue.

Placing the candle upon the pedestal of a statue, she leant her head upon her beautiful white hand—wondering within herself what on earth the Hangman could possibly be doing within the walls of Leveson House again. That he had come not to seek her, was pretty evident—inasmuch as he had just concealed himself behind a curtain, doubtless imagining that his presence and proceeding were not perceived in the mirror. Then, what was he

doing there? Had he come to rob the house?—or was he in any way engaged in the intrigue which her uncle had in hand for that night? This was the most reasonable supposition that presented itself to Ernestina's mind; and she felt convinced it must be a correct one. For she had heard from the Marquis that it was Daniel Coffin who had brought Ariadne Varian to Leveson House: and therefore it did not appear extraordinary that he should be again employed in the nobleman's service.

Having come to the conclusion that she had thus solved the mystery of Daniel Coffin's presence there on the present occasion, Lady Ernestina became deeply anxious to quit the gallery and return to her own room. She felt as if she were in the vicinage of some fearful though hidden danger. It was the feeling which may be supposed to inspire the Hindoo traveller, when passing beneath the overhanging branches of a wood where boa-constrictors are known to lie in ambush-ready to dart down upon their prey. Indeed nothing could equal—and assuredly nothing could transcend—the horror which Ernestina entertained for that terrible individual,—not so much because she knew him to be the most consummate of scoundrels—nor because he was the public executioner, whose very hands might almost be supposed to feel clammy with the touch of the strangled dead—but because he had dug the grave in which her paramour was interred at the Blackheath villa!

Conquering her emotions as well as she was able, and assuming as calm and placid a demeanour as she could possibly put on, Ernestina rose from the chair—took the candle—and moved towards the door. But she felt herself shuddering—she felt herself quailing—she felt, too, that it was almost impossible to look unconcerned, or to seem as if she fancied herself alone in that place: for her very sensations told her that from behind the curtain near the door the sinister looks of the Public Executioner were fixed upon her! Recurring to the illustration of the Hindoo traveller, we may observe that the effect was with Lady Ernestina the same as if she had to pass a place whence a snake would fling forth its hideous length and wind itself with rapid whirling coils around her—and as if she already beheld the eyes of the reptile gleaming forth at her from its ambush. Thus, with increasing trepidation—with a nervousness rapidly amounting to an excruciation—did she advance towards the

door. She was apparently looking straight forward: and with a sort of side-long gaze was she watching that curtain behind which the Hangman was concealed as if every moment she expected it to be flung aside and display the terrible intruder.

But Ernestina's appalling fears were not realized: the curtain remained closed—and all was still—all was tranquil behind it. She reached the door, which stood open: she passed into the next room—and then she threw a shuddering look over her shoulder, to see if the Hangman were not behind her. But no one was there: and regaining courage she pressed the secret spring to open the admirably-contrived door in the wainscot. Passing out of her uncle's mysterious, or rather infamous suite of apartment, she traversed the dressing-room and the bed-chamber and emerged upon the landing; where the rapid glance which she flung around at once reassured her that no one was nigh. Breathing now with comparative freedom, she ascended to her own chamber; and locking the door she flung herself into an arm-chair exhausted with the overwhelming effects of the few minutes of stupendous terror through which she had just passed.

And now the thought struck her that if the Marquis of Leveson had not really engaged the services of Daniel Coffin for some intrigue or another, it was absolutely necessary he should be informed of the presence of that individual within the walls of the mansion. But then—what excuse could she allege for having been in that gallery? depraved as she was—depraved as they knew each other thus to be, Ernestina nevertheless shrank from the idea of looking the Marquis in the face and confessing that her heated imagination had alone impelled her to visit his museum of artistic devilries and exquisite abominations. She therefore resolved to allow matters to take their chance, though she herself would not be able to seek her couch that night with the knowledge that Daniel Coffin was concealed about the premises.

While these thoughts were still agitating in her mind, she was startled by a sudden knocking at her chamber-door: and hastening to open it, she perceived that it was her lady's maid.

"Ah! my lady," exclaimed the girl, "I am glad that your ladyship has not yet retired to rest."

"Why? what has happened?—Is anything the matter?" demanded Ernestina, all sorts of terrible things connected with

the Hangman springing up in his imagination.

"Oh! nothing that I know of, my lady," replied her maid: "but his lordship's valet has just told me to run up and inform your ladyship that the Marquis would be glad to see you immediately if you were not yet undressed."

"Where is his lordship?" asked Ernestina, wonder now somewhat taking the place of terror.

"In the Gilded Saloon, my lady," was the response: "and I believe that there is company with his lordship."

"Who can they be? and what can this mean?" said Lady Dysart, in a low musing tone, as he hastily surveyed herself in a looking-glass to make sure that her toilette was in becoming order ere she obeyed the summons from the Marquis of Leveson.

But we must here digress for a little space in order to make our readers understand how it was that Ernestina's presence was thus peremptorily required at nearly half-past eleven o'clock at night in the Gilded Saloon.

CHAPTER CV.

THE WITNESS.

On this same evening Miss Bathurst gave an entertainment at her house in Stratton Street; and amongst the guests were Lord and Lady Sackville—the former, as the reader will remember, being the nephew of the hostess.

Mrs. and Miss Arbuthnot were staying with Miss Bathurst, and consequently they were of the party. Lady Curzon was also present: and if Venetia had not been there the diadem of Beauty's Queen might have been placed upon the brow of Editha. But every star of fashion—every luminary of the aristocratic world of female charms—was eclipsed by the brilliant Venetia; and while she enjoyed the universal homage of the male sex, she was at once the object of envy and adoration on the part of the ladies. In the former instance her beauty was the principal talisman of her more than imperial sway: in the latter, the secret of her power was the fact that she was the Royal Favourite.

But while Venetia, immediately after her arrival at Miss Bathurst's, became the radiant centre of an adoring group, her husband had engaged the Countess of Curzon for the first dance. Until this evening, Horace and Editha were not par-

ticularly well known to each other: they had often met in the *reunions* of fashion, it was true—but when the young man was plain *Mr. Sackville*, he had attracted no special notice on Editha's part. Now, however that he was *Lord Sackville* the case was mighty different; and as he accosted her on the present occasion, she greeted him with her sweetest smile. He sate down by her side—and as he gazed furtively upon her, it struck him that she was assuredly a most beautiful creature; while on her part, Editha wondered that she should never have before noticed how exceedingly handsome in person and elegant in manners was Lord Sackville. Being thus mutually pleased, they soon fell into a very agreeable and interesting strain of conversation until the quadrille began. Then they danced together—and when the quadrille was over, they went into the music-room; and Editha, being a proficient with the guitar—at that period a fashionable instrument—consented to practise a duet with Lord Sackville. Now, as there were very few persons in that apartment at the time—the greater portion of the guests being in the quadrille-room—Lord Sackville and Lady Curzon were enabled to amuse themselves without much constraint: and what with a little singing and more tender looks, varied by some agreeable discourse, they soon came to be very much pleased with each other.

Venetia, while lounging through the rooms upon the arm of some adoring Duke caught sight of her husband bending over Editha with tender looks and for an instant the flush of jealousy mantled upon her cheeks—but only for an instant! No sooner was the jealous sentiment conceived when it was followed by the thought that she had no right to entertain it. Not only was there a compact between her husband and herself that they were both to pursue their own pleasures independent of the moral restraint of the connubial vows; but she had already availed herself of that immunity in admitting the Earl of Curzon to her arms. Banishing the jealous sentiment, therefore she bestowed upon Editha a most affable salutation, and on her husband a look of cordial familiarity as she passed them by: and bidding her ducal companion conduct her back to the quadrille-rooms, she left her husband and Editha to continue their *tete-a-tete* without constraint.

But at about a quarter to eleven Venetia stole away from the gay scene and the brilliant throng; and retiring into Miss

Bathurst's own bedchamber, she put on a bonnet provided with a thick veil, and threw a capacious mantle over her elegant ball-dress. Then, hastily descending the stairs, she proceeded on foot to Albemarle Street: which, be it remembered, is only two minutes' walk from Stratton Street: and as the night was fine and dry, she accomplished that trifling distance without any inconvenience.

But let us now return to the interior of Leveson House, thus preceding Lady Sackville's visit thither: and we shall see what preparations the amorous Marquis has made for her reception.

Remembering that on the previous occasion of Venetia's visit to his mansion, she had been shown to the Crimson Drawing-room, whence she had penetrated into the adjoining suite of chambers, Lord Leveson now deemed it fitting to receive her in another apartment. Accordingly, he had ordered the most sumptuous room in his mansion, and which bore the title of the *Gilded Saloon*, to be prepared for the occasion. And well did that apartment deserve its title: for nothing could be more sumptuous—nothing more superb. The ceiling was painted to represent the most curious mosaic work inlaid with gold: the cornices were massive, elaborately carved, and covered with gilding;—the walls were painted a rich blue that served as a ground for a tracery of arabesques executed in gilding. The draperies were of purple velvet, with massive golden fringes sweeping the thick carpet, which was of a pattern to match the walls and curtains. The chandeliers were suspended to the ceiling by gilt chains: and every article of furniture consisted of rosewood inlaid with gilding. The mantles—for there were two fire places in this spacious room—were covered with the richest or-molu ornaments: and thus when the wax-tapers were lighted the effect produced by the whole scene was grand, gorgeous, and magnificent to a degree.

It was in this sumptuous apartment that the Marquis of Leveson anxiously awaited the coming of Venetia at about ten minutes to eleven. The reader has already seen enough of his character to comprehend what his feelings must have been, and how his passions were excited, at the prospect of the delicious victory which now at length appeared to be within his reach. For he thought to himself that the most splendid woman England ever produced—a woman of such incomparable loveliness that not even the most fastidious critic could find ought to cavil at in

feature, contour, or mien—was coming to abandon herself to his arms! He felt that all the joys and pleasure of his long life, if taken together and made to distil in their aggregate all the essence of bliss, were still dull and insipid when compared with the transcending happiness—the ineffable concentration of elysian delights which now appeared to be in store for his enjoyment.

The time-pieces on the two mantels chimed eleven; and while the silvery sounds were still vibrating in the perfumed air of the Gilded Saloon, the door was thrown open by the discreet Brockman—and a lady, enveloped in a cloak and with a black veil folded two or three times over her countenance, was ushered into the presence of the Marquis. The door instantaneously closed behind her: and raising her veil, she revealed the splendid countenance of Lady Sackville,

"You are come, my dear Venetia—you are come!" said the Marquis, flinging himself upon his knees before her. "And now do I apologise—most sincerely, most earnestly—indeed most humbly apologise—for any harsh or insulting words to which I may have given utterance yesterday. I spoke of revenge: but heaven knows I am incapable of experiencing a vindictive feeling now! Nothing but love shall engage my thoughts; nothing but adoration and worship can entrance my soul in your presence. Oh! if it were possible that you could so far forgive me on account of the past as to gaze upon me—not with a look expressive of the deep consciousness of a sacrifice—but with smiles indicative of unalloyed tenderness,—Oh! do this Venetia—regard me thus kindly—tell me that you no longer cherish animosity towards me—and what is there that I am not prepared to do for thee? My fortune—my—wealth—every thing—shall be laid at your feet—be placed at your disposal; and while none need suspect our amour, you can still remain the Royal Favourite, and yet render the Marquis of Leveson, who now kneels at your feet, supremely happy!"

When first Lady Sackville had raised the dark veil, her countenance became somewhat serious, although by no means expressive of any very strong emotion—because she had nothing to fear nor to inspire her with loathing and disgust at the part which she was acting, inasmuch as she felt assured of being rescued from the necessity of making the crowning sacrifice. When she beheld the Marquis throw himself on his knees, she could not help experiencing a sensation of pride and triumph

at the consciousness of that power of beauty which thus humbled princes and nobles at her feet; and then as Leveson contrived to pour forth his rhapsody of mingled adulation, apology, entreaty and dazzling proposal, the light of satisfaction grew more radiant upon her features—for she saw now his hopes were elevated, and she joyed in the prospect of that revenge which would speedily convert them into the bitterest disappointment.

"My lord," she said, gently withdrawing the hand which he had snatched while uttering the last few words of his impassioned address, "I beseech you to rise from this suppliant posture. It ill becomes a great and powerful nobleman such as you, to kneel at the feet of an unpretending woman such as I."

"O angelic creature!" exclaimed the enraptured Marquis, his head too much lost in dreams of bliss to allow him to notice the slight accent of sarcasm with which Venetia had spoken; "you speak of yourself with a humility that is too disparaging;—for the whole world of taste, fashion, and aristocracy recognizes in you the peerless queen of beauty."

"And doubtless these united worlds of which your lordship speaks," said Venetia, with an irony charmingly veiled beneath a smile, "have deputed you to become the mouthpiece or their flatteries."

"Flatteries!" cried the Marquis, starting to his feet; "they are truths—irrefragable, patent, delicious truths! But do you not intend to lay aside this cloak which envelops a form combining the graces of Venus with the luxuriance of Flora, the majesty of Juno, and the imposing splendour of Diana!"

"Ah! my lord," interrupted Venetia, with a merry laugh "you would personify in me all the attributes of the heathen divinities!"

"Every idea of beauty which I can possibly conceive," said the Marquis, gazing upon Venetia with the devouring eyes of passion, "must be called into request to depict your loveliness. But let me remove that invidious bonnet with its great thick veil—let me loosen the strings of this shrouding mantle—"

"Hush! some one approaches!" ejaculated Venetia: and she drew the veil over her countenance.

At the same moment a knock at the door of the saloon was heard; and the Marquis hastened to see who was there—muttering to himself, "Perdition what can this interruption mean? I ordered that on no account was I to be disturbed;"—then on

opening the door and beholding his valet Brockman, he demanded in an impetuous tone, "What do you want?"

"This gentleman insists upon seeing your lordship. He would take no excuse—and indeed he has even thought fit to follow me hither:"—and as Brockman thus spoke, he looked round towards some one behind.

"Ah! ejaculated the Marquis, an expression of bitter annoyance and deep misgiving suddenly appearing upon his countenance, as he beheld Sir Douglas Huntingdon advancing along the passage leading from the principal landing to the portal of the Gilded Saloon.

"My dear Marquis," said the Baronet, in a friendly—or indeed with the familiar manner of former times,— "I wished most particularly to speak to you; and knowing that I am at all times welcome, I persisted in making Brockman introduce me hither. He is a very excellent servant, I know: and therefore I forgive him the little impertinence implied in the supercilious manner with which he spoke of me as *this gentleman*,—just for all the world as if he did not know me as well as his own master."

"But my dear Huntingdon," said Lord Leveson, in a tone of remonstrance, "I am engaged—delicately engaged at this moment——"

"Not too delicately to receive an old friend like me," return the Baronet: and without more ado, he walked straight into the Gilded Saloon.

The Marquis, who saw some evil intent lurking beneath the affected good humour of Sir Douglas Huntingdon, made a sign for the valet to withdraw, and closing the door again, he turned with deep anxiety towards Venetia, to ascertain by her proceedings, whether this intrusion was a prearranged scheme between the intruder and herself.

"My lord," said the Baronet, now suddenly throwing off the mask of familiarity, which he had worn in the presence of the valet for the purpose of preventing that menial from suspecting that anything extraordinary was in progress,— "My lord," he said adopting a stern and imperious tone, "you will have the kindness to request the attendance of your niece Lady Ernestina Dysart."

"My niece!—and wherefore?" exclaimed the Marquis, as much in amazement as in anger.

"Because I wish to say a few words in her ladyship's presence," rejoined the Baronet, with the tone and look of a man

who meant to enforce his designs and had the power to do so.

"But wherefore my niece?" cried the Marquis, now trembling with the apprehension of something wrong, "Would you expose me in her presence?"

"My lord, I have no doubt," answered the Baronet, with a peculiar smile, "that her ladyship is tolerably well aware of all your lordship's proceedings. Was she not your accomplice in inveigling Miss Louisa Stanley—"

"Ah! the mention of that name," exclaimed the Marquis, with an expression of fiendish malignity, "reminds me that if there is to be exposure on one side, there shall be exposure on the other—and that if you mean to proclaim any secret matters connected with the name of *Leveson*, I shall hold myself justified in making public all I know in connection with the name of *Stanley*!"

"You will tell a different story presently," said the Baronet, with a look which made the Marquis quail, for he felt how deeply he was already in Huntingdon's power on account of the affair of *Ariadne*, and he likewise saw full well the Baronet had somehow or another obtained a still deeper hold upon him than even *that*—but how or in reference to what circumstance he could not conjecture.

"Will you explain yourself, Huntingdon?" accordingly asked the bewildered and terrified nobleman: "will you tell me what all this means? *Venetia* I appeal to you—is it to be peace or war between us?"

"A treaty of peace, if you will," responded Lady Sackville, who had hitherto remained a silent but not uninterested witness of the scene: then raising her veil and bending her indignant looks upon the Marquis, she added, "But it must be a treaty of peace accompanied by guarantees and securities—and those can only be explained in the presence of Lady Ernestina Dysart."

"Lady Sackville's remark furnishes the key to the whole business," observed the Baronet: "and to cut the discussion short, I do *this*:"—then, as he pulled the gilded bell-rope, he said, "Now your lordship can give orders for lady Ernestina to be fetched hither."

Brockman speedily answered the summons: and Lord Leveson, mastering his emotions as well as he was able, gave him that message which, as the reader has already seen, was delivered to Ernestina through the medium of her lady's maid.

When Ernestina, in pursuance of this message, repaired to the Gilded Saloon, she

first noticed her uncle pacing uneasily to and fro: then her eyes rested upon the Baronet, to whom she bowed with haughty coldness, while a blush at the same time suffused her countenance, as she felt that he must entertain a very mean and contemptuous opinion of her indeed after her conduct on the affair of *Louisa Stanley*. But her looks, speedily flitting away from Sir Douglas Huntingdon, fell upon the countenance of *Venetia*, whom she knew by sight, having once or twice beheld her riding in her carriage in the park.

"Lady Ernestina Dysart," said the Baronet, "this is Lady Sackville."

A scarcely perceptible bow took place on either side, for those two women felt that they stood as enemies in each other's presence. But even while thus exchanging this slight salutation, they darted upon each other a look of scrutinizing curiosity. Indeed the two handsomest ladies in London perhaps in all England—were at this moment face to face and the mutual hostility which they experienced, arose not from the comparatively lofty rivalry of beauty, but from the manner and more paltry cause that each was acquainted with certain secrets regarding the other, thus placing them as it were mutually in each other's power.

"Now that her ladyship is present," Sir Douglas Huntingdon hastened to observe, "we will with your permission, my lord, repair to the Crimson Drawing Room."

"And wherefore?" demanded Leveson gazing in stupid astonishment upon Sir Douglas, while Lady Ernestina grew more nervous every instant.

"You will see anon," was the Baronet's reply "Wherefore waste time in useless questions and answers?"

"True" muttered the Marquis, feeling that the sooner all suspense was got rid of, the better. "Come then to the Crimson Drawing Room."

And Lord Leveson accordingly led the way thither followed by *Venetia* (who drew her veil down. Ernestina, and the Baronet, Brockman, whom they encountered on the landing, hastened to light the wax candles in the drawing-room in obedience to his lordship's order. When this was done and the valet had retired, both the Marquis and Ernestina bent their looks with evident anxiety upon the Baronet for an explanation of his proceedings: but they were still more amazed and likewise alarmed, when Huntingdon advanced towards the door opening into the mysterious suite of apartments. Finding it lock-

ed—for the Hangman had fastened it again on passing that way ere now—the Baronet said in a voice which showed that he meant to be obeyed. “Your lordship will be pleased to open this door.”

“For what purpose ? asked the nobleman, trembling with the very vagueness of his apprehensions.

But a mortal terror now seized upon Lady Ernestina for the thought instantaneously flashed to her mind that the presence of Daniel Coffin in that suite of apartments was most probably connected with the present proceeding of Sir Douglas Huntingdon. Perceiving, however, the necessity of maintaining her presence of mind for any emergency that might transpire, she exerted all her moral strength to subdue her agonizing emotions and become equal to the ordeal through which it seemed as if she were doomed to pass.

“The key, my lord !” ejaculated Huntingdon impetuously : wherefore persist in thus wasting valuable time ?

Without giving utterance to another word either of remonstrance or remark, Lord Leveson at once produced the key and opened the door.

“Now let us walk in,” said the Baronet, leading the way into the first room of that mysterious suite—not the room, be it understood, containing the mechanical chairs : but the one luxuriously furnished with sofas, arranged all around against the walls, in the oriental fashion.

Having brought one of the wax-candles in his hand from the Crimson Drawing Room, Sir Douglas proceeded to light those which stood on the mantel of those elegantly-furnished apartment and observing that the door into the next room of the suite stood open, he so held the light for a moment as to enable him to plunge his looks across that room, so as to ascertain that the door at the extremity leading into the gallery was likewise opened. These observations he made with inward satisfaction : for he felt confident that wherever the Hangman might be concealed, he would hear the signal previously concerted for his appearance.

While Sir Douglas was lighting the candles, Venetia took a seat upon the sofa, and Lady Ernestina placed herself at a little distance. The Marquis leant his elbow on the mantel, and gazed with evident uneasiness upon the Baronet who thus so coolly but yet so appropriately acted as Master of the Ceremonies in the proceeding which he himself appeared to have strangely got up.

“Now, my lord,” said the Baronet,

throwing himself negligently upon the sofa, “it is time that we should come to an understanding together upon a certain subject. This subject is the claim which you assert with regard to Lady Sackville—a claim which I cannot denominate as one of love, nor which I need particularize at all. Suffice it say that now—this night and for evermore—must a settlement of the matter take place. But how stands the affair ? Let us see. Accident has made your Lordship acquainted with certain circumstances which Lady Sackville does not wish revealed : whereas your lordship threatens her with a revelation of those circumstances unless she will consent to listen favourably to your overtures. But in me behold the sincere conscientious, and resolute friend of Lady Sackville once the friend of your lordship, and still disposed to continue your lordship’s friend, provided we come to an amicable understanding this night,”

“And that understanding ?” demanded Lord Leveson, impatiently.

“A treaty of peace” responded Huntingdon, “as Lady Sackville herself hinted ere now : but with such guarantees for its inviolable maintenance on your lordship’s part—”

“And those guarantees ?” exclaimed the Marquis, interrogatively.

“Listen,” rejoined the Baronet, “and a few words will explain them. On the one side you are acquainted with certain secrets relative to Lady Sackville—and you hold them in terror over her : but on the other hand Lady Sackville is acquainted with certain secrets relative to you, and therefore she balances her power against your’s. The consequence is that if you expose Lady Sackville, she will expose you and therefore Lady Sackville and yourself stand upon equal terms.”

“No such thing !” exclaimed the Marquis, thinking to himself that if the Baronet’s scheme went no farther than this, it was not a very formidable one after all. “For look you, and understand the matter well,” he continued, his tone and manner becoming more exultant as he continued. “The things that I know concerning Lady Sackville may be proclaimed without causing any injury to redound upon myself. But this is not the case with her. Let her go and tell that I possess this suite of rooms—explain all the mysteries of that gallery yonder—and she will be confessing that she has visited this museum of exquisite indelicacies and refined immoralities. Tell the tale of the mechanical chairs—say that Lady Sackville herself has been caught in—

one, and that Louisa Stanley has been similarly ensnared—and will the reputation of either lady be enhanced by proclaiming the fact that they have ever set foot within these rooms?" No: for their own sake this tale will be kept quiet. Then, as for the affair of Ariadne Varian, I do not exactly know in what relation the girl may stand to you, Sir Douglas—but I think that if she possess the feelings of delicacy for which you have given her credit in my hearing, she will not thank you for making her history a common topic and herself the theme of general discourse. Therefore, all the secrets which you know concerning me are secrets which neither you, Sir Douglas—nor you, Lady Sackville, will choose to proclaim aloud, for your own sakes, and for the sake of those in whom you are interested."

"You therefore believe, my laid," said Huntingdon, "that you stand on the vantage ground and that you can dictate your own terms of Lady Sackville?"—and as the Baronet thus spoke his lip curled with a smile of defiance.

"I do believe that I stand upon that vantage-ground," replied the Marquis of Leveson, observing the smile and not exactly liking it. "Have you anything more to say?"

"Yes—you force me into farther explanations," rejoined the Baronet. "Have you any regard for your niece Lady Ernestina?—and has her ladyship no secrets which *she* would be sorry to have revealed?"

"'Tis a manly proceeding," exclaimed Ernestina, her cheeks flushing and her eyes darting fire, "for you to make war upon me!"

"It is not I who make war upon your ladyship," answered the Baronet. "It is Lady Sackville who is availing herself of all the weapons of defence with which circumstances have armed her against the Marquis of Leveson. And therefore if his lordship have really no regard for you, Lady Ernestina, he may indeed perhaps occupy the vantage-ground in respect to Lady Sackville: but if on the other hand his lordship has any regard for the reputation and honour of his niece—"

"But what know you of Lady Ernestina?" demanded Lord Leveson, hastily "that she appeared to be placed in a somewhat suspicious position with regard to Louisa Stanley—"

"Certainly that is one fact, my lord," exclaimed the Baronet: "but it is nothing—absolutely nothing—it sinks in to utter contempt, in comparison with the part

which Lady Ernestina played in sending her own husband to the scaffold!

A shriek thrilled from the lips of Ernestina, while the Marquis of Leveson started as if suddenly galvanized—and a smile of exultation and gratified revenge lighted up the countenance of Venetia.

"Ah! now you perceive that I am indeed acquainted with secrets of a tremendous import," continued the Baronet, glancing from the startled nobleman to his horror-stricken niece, who sat pale and troubling upon the sofa, gasping for breath, and with her eyes staring wildly: "and now perhaps it can be understood wherefore I deemed it proper—or at all events expedient—for Lady Ernestina Dysart to be present on the occasion? And if you ask me why I choose this apartment as the scene of your discussion, let me remind her ladyship that it belongs to the suite in which a compact was entered into by herself, a certain personage who shall be nameless, and a man holding a fearful and a dreaded office—a compact in virtue of which the late Paul Dysart was cheated by false hope until the very last instant! Therefore as the Public Executioner himself is no stranger to the mysteries and the infamies of this suite of apartments, surely the scene of such atrocities, such devilries, and such abominations as these rooms have witnessed, is the most fitting for such a debate as the present?"

At this moment a shadow darkened the threshold communicating with the next room—and Daniel Coffin made his appearance.

"O God!" groaned Lady Ernestina, in a paroxysm of ineffable anguish: and she covered her face with her hands to shut out that dreadful being from her view.

The Marquis of Leveson gave vent to an ejaculation of mingled rage and disgust. As for Venetia, whose veil was thickly folded over her countenance—though for a moment a shudder passed over her form on thus beholding the Public Executioner, yet at the next instant all sense of loathing was absorbed in that of triumph.

"Here is the witness," exclaimed the Baronet, "who can prove whether or not Lady Ernestina Dysart, was the means of sealing the doom of her own husband!"

"O God! O God!" groaned the unhappy woman, writhing under the contortions of the heart's transcending anguish.

"Sir Douglas Huntingdon," said the Marquis of Leveson, suddenly walking straight up to the baronet—clutching him by the arm—and speaking in a low hollow

tone, "put an end to this dreadful scene and I will accept any terms you choose to dictate. But, for God's sake, spare my niece!"

"Not to me must you appeal my lord—not to me!" returned Huntingdon; "But to Lady Sackville, whom you have menaced—outraged—humiliated——"

"Ah! here is the triumph now!" rejoined the Marquis, bitterly: then accosting her abruptly as she sat still closely veiled upon the sofa he said, "Will your ladyship say one kind word to Huntingdon on our behalf—for the sake of my niece and myself—or shall I fall down upon my knees at your feet——"

"No, no—this is sufficient!" hastily observed Venetia. "Sir Douglas will negotiate with you ——"

"Good!" ejaculated the Marquis: then with a low bow to Venetia, he drew the Baronet aside; saying, "What are your conditions?—name them——"

"You know them already," rejoined the Baronet: "inviolable secrecy in those matters which have come to your knowledge relative to Lady Sackville—a cessation of all overtures, persecutions, and proposals to her in future——"

"But you are now spoke of guarantees for the fulfilment of this treaty on my part?" said Lord Leveson inquiringly.

"Those guarantees—are they not furnished by the circumstances which have just transpired?" demanded the Baronet.

"The treaty consists of silence, secrecy, and abstinence from all hostility on your part: and the guarantee is that if you violate this compact you must expect no mercy to be shown towards your niece, Lady Ernestina."

"Enough, enough—it is a bargain!" returned the Marquis, in a hurried tone. "I abandon all pretension—all hope—in respect to Venetia," he added, in a scarcely audible voice: "but for God's sake, spare my niece—spare my family the infamy that such an exposure," and he glanced towards the Hangman, "would entail upon it!"

"Yes—upon the conditions stipulated you shall be spared that crowning degradation," said the Baronet. "But mark you well!—should the private affairs of Lady Sackville—you know what I mean—become whispered abroad ever so lightly,—should ever the faintest rumour of those secrets obtain currency—the authorship will be at once attributed to yourself or to Lady Ernestina; and then pitilessly, without remorse—unhesitatingly indeed—shall everything be divulged concerning the

mode adopted to send Dysart to the scaffold and to lull him into security through the medium of the Public Executioner himself! You understand me?"

"I do," responded the Marquis of Leveson, in a low deep tone more indicative of a sense of utter humiliation than of angry passion.

The Baronet turned away and accosted Daniel Coffin, who for the two or three minutes that had elapsed since he appeared upon the threshold, had been leaning in a free and easy manner against the door-post, viewing with the sardonic satisfaction of a Mephistophiles the sensation which his presence had excited.

"You may now take your departure," said the Baronet, placing a purse in his hands. "There are the remaining hundred guineas due to you for your services in this matter."

"'Tisn't always that I get two hundred guineas so cheap," observed the Hangman with a coarse laugh. "Good night my lord—good night all!" and stalking through the apartment, he issued forth by the door leading into the Crimson Drawing Room.

"Now, Venetia," whispered Sir Douglas Huntingdon, as he accosted Lady Sackville: "we also may depart."

"Her ladyship accordingly rose from the sofa: and taking the Baronet's arm she accompanied him from the apartment also passing through the Crimson Drawing Room. She kept the veil well folded over her countenance: but this precaution was scarcely necessary, for they encountered no one on the landing or the staircase—and the hall porter was so overcome with drowsiness that he actually rose from his great leathern chair to open the door with his eyes shut, thus performing his duty mechanically rather than in full consciousness:

On issuing forth from Leveson House, Lady Sackville was escorted by the Baronet back to Miss Bathurst's residence in Stratton Street. There however he left her,—parting from her even before the front door was opened to give her admittance. Nevertheless, ere they had thus separated, a few rapidly whispered words of deep tender meaning passed between them.

Venetia, hurrying up-stairs to Miss Bathurst's bed-room, threw aside the bonnet and cloak—arranged her hair before the mirror—assumed her brightest look—and returned into the quadrille-room. There she was immediately surrounded by her admirers

who asked what had become of her for the last hour—for it was now midnight, and she had been a little more than an hour absent. "A temporary indisposition that compelled her to retire" was the ready apology: and many a worshipper expressed his grief to learn that her ladyship should have been indisposed even for an instant. The supper-rooms were now thrown open; and thither Venetia repaired, leaning on the arm of some nobleman. Her husband and the Countess of Curzon were still in each other's company—and Venetia saw that an amour was settled in that quarter.

It was about one o'clock when Lord and Lady Sackville took leave of Miss Bathurst and entered their carriage. During the ride back to Carlton House, which only occupied a few minutes, the husband and wife conversed on perfectly indifferent subject—for Venetia did not think it worth while to let Horace know what had occurred at Lord Leveson's; and, on his part, he had not observed the temporary absence of his wife from his aunt's brilliant saloons.

On reaching Carlton House, Lord and Lady Sackville ascended to their own suite of apartments, and on the stairs they encountered Jessica, who made a quick and furtive sign of intelligence to her mistress. Venetia understood it well—so well, indeed that it brought a blush of mingled shame and pleasure to her cheeks. Giving her husband to understand that the Prince proposed to pass the night with her, she hastened to her boudoir—pausing for a moment in the passage to intimate to Jessica that she would dispense with her services till the morning. But on entering the boudoir—on passing into that bower where the wax-tapers burnt upon the mantel and the air was warm and perfumed—the frail but beauteous Venetia instantaneously clasped, not in the arms of the Prince Regent as she had led her husband to suppose, but in the warm and impassioned embrace of Sir Douglas Huntingdon!

It was therefore to an useful purpose that the Baronet, through his intimacy with the Prince, had learnt the secret of the private entrances to Carlton House; and if he had now availed himself of one of them in order to seek the boudoir of the enchanting Venetia, it assuredly was not without her consent nor without a previous stipulation for so blissful a reward!

CHAPTER CVI.

ANOTHER SCENE AT LEVESON HOUSE.

When the Hangman, Sir Douglas Huntingdon, and Lady Sackville had quitted the room where the strange and exciting discussion took place, Ernestina slowly withdrew her hands from her countenance and rose from her seat. She was pale—deadly pale: and there was a sort of staggering in her gait as if she experienced a vertigo or was tottering under a load of sorrows too heavy to endure.

"Well, Ernestina—it might have been worse," said Lord Leveson: "pray, therefore, console yourself."

"Good heavens! how can you ask me to console myself?" murmured his niece in a hollow tone: when you perceive that this tremendous secret of mine is already known where it ought not to be: and who can say how widely it may be repeated again?"

"It is no use to anticipate the worst," said the Marquis, "or to go forward to meet misfortunes as if they did not advance upon us quick enough of their own accord. It is tolerably clear that the villain Coffin has whispered the talent to the Baronet, who has availed himself of it to coerce me into terms on the present occasion," he added, in a tone of bitter vexation.

"Yes, it must be as you say," rejoined Ernestina. "But it is horrible—horrible—to be in the power of that dreadful man!"

"Horrible indeed!" echoed the Marquis. "But how the deuce could he possibly have gained admission into the house? how concealed himself in these rooms?"

"An accomplished villain such as he," replied Ernestina, "can insinuate himself anywhere."

"Ah! I see that I must make a complete garrison of the house against such rascals," observed the Marquis: then in a peevish tone to himself he muttered something expressive of his bitter annoyance at having been defeated—so signally defeated—in his designs upon Lady Sackville.

Ernestina, exhausted in mind and body and longing to be alone, bade her uncle good night and ascended once again to her own chamber. There she locked the door—flung herself with the listless abandonment of despair upon a seat—and gave way to her bitter reflections. But in the midst of this excruciating reverie, she was suddenly started by a sound like the rustling of drapery: and this was immediately followed by the noise of something moving in the direction of the bed. The room was

spacious; and the fire place at which Ernestina was sitting was a dozen yards from the couch. Springing to her feet, she held her breath to listen and gazed with straining eyes towards the bed. Heavens! it was indeed no delusion: something was moving—some one was there;—and as the sickening truth struck upon her comprehension, the terrible fear was indeed confirmed by the appearance of a man thrusting himself forth from under the bed. Ah—horror! horror!—it was the Public Executioner!

A shriek—but low, and almost stifled with the harrowing nature of the feelings that produced it—fell from Ernestina's lips as she darted towards the bell-rope. But quick as lightning the thought flashed to her mind that she was so utterly in the man's power as to render exposure of *him* an inevitable step to the exposure of *herself*! She therefore stopped suddenly short—fixed upon him her wildly starting eyes—and with her quivering lips that were as pale as ashes, she gave utterance to a few harsh words which were well-nigh choked by the feeling that swelled up as it were into her very throat.

"What means this intrusion here?" was the demand which her parched tongue and white lips thus framed.

"A pretty question to a man who has done so much for you," exclaimed Coffin, with a horrible leer. "One would really think that you great ladies of fashion hadn't a bit of gratitude about you."

"In one word, what want you?" demanded Ernestina, her heart becoming ice to its centre. "Is it money—more money?—are you insatiable?"

"Insatiable? Yes—but not at this moment for gold—'tis for love," returned the Hangman.

"Love!" echoed Ernestina, with a fearful quivering in the voice: for the design which the wretch's words revealed, suddenly conjured up before her mental vision a new danger—one of even a more tremendous character than any which had previously menaced her.

"And why not *love*?" cried the Hangman his looks wandering slowly over her fine form with the gloating avidity of brutal passion. "Do you think I hav'n't got the same feelings as other people?" And if I am now speaking to you in this manner, you have only yourself to think for it. I came to this house to-night for quite another purpose: but on finding my way into the gallery just now, who should I see there but your ladyship?"

"True!" murmured the miserable

Ernestina, a rush of blood crimsoning her previously pale countenance.

"Ah! now you look handsomer than ever," ejaculated the Hangman. "But as I was telling you, if I had not seen your ladyship in that place filled with such precious objects for a delicate creature like yourself to contemplate, I should never have thought of proposing what I am going to do now. But since as a matter of course you went there to feast your eyes with all those pretty things, it is quite clear you are not over particular; and as variety is charming and you have had a Prince for your lover, perhaps now you won't object to accept Mr. Daniel Coffin in the same capacity?"

Stupified with dread horror, Ernestina stood gazing in speechless vacuity upon that man who dared to address her in this language. But did her ears deceive her—was it a chimera of the brain?—or could it be really true, that this loathsome wretch—this hideous monster—could imagine for a moment that she, the high-born, tenderly nurtured, fastidiously reared lady of rank, should abandon herself to the embraces of such a revolting animal?

Good heavens! could it indeed be possible? Yes—as she gazed upon that ruffian, his looks—his manner—all demonstrated that his fearful words had indeed expressed the still more appalling purpose of his soul: and with a low moan of ineffable anguish, Ernestina staggered back a few paces and sank upon a seat.

"Come, come," said the Hangman impatiently, "I really can't understand you ladies of fashion a bit. You don't mind employing a man like me to do all your dirty work—dig a hole in your garden by night to bury a dead body—gammon a husband with hopes that are never to be fulfilled so as to send him to the scaffold—"

"Hush, hush!" exclaimed Ernestina once more starting from her seat, and this time a positive agony of fearful excitement—for a flame was diffused throughout her entire being, molten lead appeared to be coursing through her veins, and the very chords of her brain seemed to be strung to the extremest verge of tension. Monster—fiend—devil—I will no longer endure this constant persecution at your hands!"

"What is the use of calling me names," interrupted the Hangman, with a savage growl, though his looks still burnt with a fierce desire. "I tell you again that it is your own fault that I am now talking to you in this way. Seeing you in that

gallery, in the midst of all those figures and pictures, put queer notions into my head; and as I watched you from behind the curtain where I was concealed, I thought to myself that after all you are one of the handsomest ladies I ever saw in my life. So I came to a certain resolution; and after the scene that took place just now, instead of leaving the house, I thought to myself that if I could only find your ladyship's chamber, I might make myself happy and comfortable there for the rest of the night. So I crept upstairs to this floor; and as the door of this very room stood open, I peeped in. That glance was enough. By the mere look of the room, the nick-nacks on the dressing-table, the mourning dresses hanging up in that clothes-press there that stands open—all these things told me in an instant that this was your ladyship's chamber. So here I am—here I mean to remain till daylight."

While the Hangman was thus speaking, Ernestina interrupted him not, because she was revolving a thousand different and wildly impossible schemes in her mind. To pretend to yield to his humour and poison him—or to procure a knife and stab him to the heart—or else to fetch a pistol from her uncle's room and shoot him through the head—or, again to alarm the house and have him thrust forth at any risk,—these were some of the projects which entered her imagination but which were discarded one after the other as soon as conceived. Thus, by the time he had ceased speaking, she had decided upon nothing, but was plunged in still more painful bewilderment, terror, and dismay than at first.

"You cannot be serious in what you say?" she suddenly cried, in a fit of desperation. "Tell me what will satisfy you—what sum do you require? Name the amount, and it shall be your's. Come with me to my uncle's chamber, and he will at once satisfy you on that score."

"It is not gold that I want just at this moment," said the Hangman, doggedly. "I have made two hundred guineas to-day from Sir Douglas Huntingdon—and six days hence I am to have five hundred more from the Prince Regent—which, by the bye, you yourself are to bring me——"

"I! what mean you?" exclaimed Ernestina, in amazement.

"Oh! it is all cut and dried between me and the Prince," returned the Hangman. "I honoured his Royal Highness with my noble presence at his crib—I mean Carlton House—yesterday: and we

had a cozie chat together. I told him that I did not want to be made Marquis, or a Duke, or an Earl, or any nonsense of that sort; but what I wanted was coin—blunt—cash—rhino!"

"Well—what next?" inquired Ernestina.

"The Prince promised that I should have five hundred guineas in a week—that is to say, next Wednesday night at eleven o'clock, in the middle recess at Westminster Bridge on the left hand side going over, your ladyship is to put into my hands the sum named——"

"But what on earth made the Prince fix upon me?" demanded Ernestina, all her thoughts now turned into another channel.

"Oh! simply because he said that as you was interested in the matter, you ought to take a part in it. But it is possible, you know that the Prince may think better of it and send somebody else instead of your ladyship. I don't matter to me who it is, so long as some one keeps the appointment and brings the money."

While the Hangman was thus speaking, a thought which had suddenly sprung vaguely up in Ernestina's mind, rapidly expanded into tangible consistency; and by the time he had concluded, it had settled down into a stern and inflexible resolution.

"The Prince, you say, intend me to become the bearer of a large sum of money for you next Wednesday night?"—and as she spoke, she assumed an air of comparative indifference.

"Yes—I have already told you so," returned the Hangman. "Middle recess—Westminster Bridge—next Wednesday night—at eleven o'clock—punctual to the instant—that's the appointment!"

"And you will be there?" said Ernestina with a rapid sidelong glance at the man.

"Yes—trust me for that!" he answered. "I should think so, when five hundred guineas are to be got!"

"You will be there in person?" repeated Ernestina, evidently with a deepening pre-occupation of thought: "and you will not send anybody else."

"No—not I!" ejaculated Daniel Coffin.

"But, why are you putting all these questions?"

"Because—because," faltered Ernestina, the blood again rushing to her cheeks and then leaving them pale as death once more, so that she was evident she was swayed by some powerful emotion—or else perhaps by the sudden apprehension that

the resolutions which had ere now settled in her mind was suspected by the Hangman.

"Because what?" he demanded, impatiently.

"Because," she repeated, instantaneously recovering her self-possession, and now speaking with apparent earnestness and without hesitation,—"because if we are to meet that night, in the way you have described, you can in mercy accord me a delay until then—so that I may bring my mind to reflect with less aversion upon the sacrifice you demand."

"Ah!" ejaculated Coffin: "I understand your ladyship's tricks! You think to induce me to leave you now—and then you will trust either to the chapter of accidents or to the cooling down of my desires to save you from what I am now seeking? But I don't mean to be trifled with in this manner. Mind you shall be to-night—by fair means if you will—if not, by foul—"

And as he thus spoke, Daniel Coffin advanced towards Ernestina, his eyes flaming with lascivious passion.

"Stand back!" she cried, suddenly armed with the courage of despair. "I cannot—I will not submit to you this night. The demand is so sudden—so overwhelming—and then, I have suffered too so much anguish from other cause—But I swear—most solemnly, sacredly swear—that if you will only grant me the delay until that night when we shall meet on Westminster Bridge—"

"No!" exclaimed the Hangman; "not a day—not an hour—not a minute!"

"Then, by heaven!" cried Ernestina, darting to the bell-pull and seizing it in her hand; "I will not submit this night!"

There was something so resolute in her manner—wild and frenzied though it were—that Daniel Coffin was staggered: and it struck him that in the whirl of her agitated feelings she might alarm the whole house, thereby occasioning an exposure equally unprofitable and dangerous to them both. He accordingly began to cool down somewhat in his desires; and feeling the necessity of consenting to a compromise, he nevertheless, with characteristic greed, resolved that it should be one based upon immediate advantage to himself.

"Come—what will you give me to agree to your proposal?" he said, with a tone and manner full of sullen menace.

"There is my purse," replied Ernestina, still retaining her grasp upon the bell-rope with one hand and pointing with the

other towards the toilette-table; "and you will find a few jewels in the box. Take them all—everything you fancy—and then leave me."

"But what security have I got," growled the Hangman, "that you will prove more condescending when we meet next Wednesday night?"

"Shall I not be as much in your power then," asked the lady, "as I am now? The relative circumstances of our position will not be changed: you can still threaten me—still coerce—still intimidate me;—but by that time I shall have brought my mind to view the thing with less horror, less aversion, and less disgust."

"Well—be it so," said the Hangman, "And now mind me—that when we meet next Wednesday night, I stand no more nonsense; but you shall go with me to some place where we can be comfortable together—"

"Yes, yes," exclaimed Ernestina, her soul revolting from his words and looks down to its utter profundities, "I swear most solemnly—most sacredly—that I will do as you desire. But once more, I insist that you leave me now!"

"Well, well, I shan't stay much longer," rejoined Coffin, savagely: then advancing to the toilette table, he helped himself to the purse and the jewels.

Having secured these spoils about his person, the ruffian unlocked the door—flung a parting look of deep and menacing meaning upon Ernestina, warning her not to forget her pledge—and then stole forth from the chamber. The lady retained her hold upon the bell-pull for nearly a minute: then, feeling satisfied that the dreadful man had indeed taken his departure, she hastened to re-lock the door—remaining alone, no longer with the excitement of bewildering thoughts, but in the cold, deep, immovable sternness of that resolve to which she had come.

CHAPTER CVII.

ST. JAMES'S PALACE.

In one of the earlier chapters of this work we have described Florence Eaton. About nineteen years of age—invested with a Madonna-like beauty, the innocence of which surrounded her as with a celestial halo—possessing a complexion of the purest white, dazzlingly transparent, and with the gentlest tint of the rose-leaf upon her cheeks—she was a being to whom the epithet of *angelic* may be applied. Her

hair, of the lightest brown tinged with a golden hue, and seeming in the sunbeams to be of that precious shade which belongs to the silk when gathered fresh from the silkworm, was worn in a profusion of ringlets falling upon her bright and polished shoulders. The tranquil lustre as well as the hue of heaven was in her eyes of soft azure: no coral was brighter than her lips;—no Grecian statue was ever chiselled with a more classical precision than that which marked her exquisite profile.

Then her shape—we have already described it as that of the sylph, blending perfection of symmetry with grace and elegance of carriage. The beautiful arching of the neck was of swanlike curvature: the bust, gently developed, was perfect in its virgin contours;—and as she walked, her form exhibited all the willowy elasticity of girlhood.

Gay and happy in her artless innocence was this charming creature: and in her liveliest moments her laugh came gushing forth so merrily melodious that it seemed as if the teeth appearing between the parting coral of the lips, were themselves strings of musical pearls. Guile and deception were unknown to her: she was as ignorant of the duplicities, the falsities, and the artificialities of the world as the bird of paradise in its own genial clime is ignorant of the hail, the frost, the snow, and the ice of the hyperborean regions to the northward of inhospitable Labrador.

It may have chanced that the reader, while roving in a garden during the warm months when nature puts forth all the brightest and the best of her floral decorations, has observed a beautiful lily timidly revealing its virgin purity in the midst of all the most flaunting and gaudy occupants of the glowing parterres. That chaste and stainless lily seemed as it were out of place, unless for the purpose of contrast, by the side of full-blown peonies blushing their deepest red—groups of tulips displaying their variegated hues in all the pomp of their gaudy glory—the pinks drooping on their slender stalks—the marigolds vying with the bright yellow of the sun—the red roses expanding in all the pride belonging to Flora's cherished favourites—the glaring wall-flowers bright with their mingling yellow, warm sienna, and rich brown tints—the blue-bells deep as the indigo seen in the hyacinth of India's plains—and all the other ornaments of the garden that force themselves most obtrusively upon the gaze. The eye, therefore when contemplating such a scene,

and when intoxicated with the blaze of beauty belonging to all that floral pomp, has settled at last with a feeling of relief and with a touching interest upon that fair, chaste and modest lily appearing in the midst of such overwhelming gaud and grandeur. Apply this illustration to the world of fashion; and if amidst the brilliant galaxy of splendid Duchesses, exquisite Marchionesses, superb Countesses, and magnificent ladies of all grades and degrees of aristocratic rank, you behold one charming, retiring and unsophisticated girl scarcely conscious of her own beauty, and calculated to please and interest the eye—not to dazzle and overwhelm the senses,—then have you found your lily amongst your flaunting, gaudy pageantry of flowers. And such was Florence Eaton!

Four or five days had elapsed after the incidents contained in the few last chapters; and it was about noon, when Lady Florimel said to her niece, "My Lady Florence, I think that I have a little treat in store for you to-day."

"What is it, my dear aunt?" inquired the beauteous girl, gazing up with a smiling countenance from the embroidery in which she was engaged.

"You know, my dear girl," replied Pauline, "that her Royal Highness the Princess Sophia was here a few days ago, and likewise again yesterday. Amongst other things the Princess said to me, was that if ever you should feel inclined to visit the State Apartments at St. James's Palace——"

"Oh! indeed I should be delighted," exclaimed Florence; "for inasmuch as you have an objection to attending the levees which the Prince of Wales sometimes holds there, and as you do not wish me to be presented at Court, I shall have no opportunity of seeing those superb apartments unless privately as you propose."

"And do you wish to be presented at Court?" asked Lady Florimel, gazing earnestly and not without some little feeling of uneasiness upon her lovely niece.

"Oh! no," exclaimed the artless girl, her silver voice as expressive of sincerity as were her innocent looks. "You have taught me to regard all regal splendour and princely show as being not only valueless, but also inconsistent with the true spirit of the age; and I can assure you, my dear aunt, that I am not faithless to your admirable teachings."

"Then you are my own dear girl!" said Pauline, infinitely relieved by this answer.

"But to return to what we were now saying, I propose to take you at once to St. James's Palace, to pass an hour with the Princess and visit the State Apartments. Hasten and achieve your toilette—the carriage is ordered for half-past twelve."

"And do not you mean to accompany us, my dear uncle?" asked Florence, approaching Lord Florimel, who was seated on the sofa reading the newspaper.

"No dear Florence," he replied, with a smile. "The Princess has invited you ladies in so cordial and friendly a manner, that the presence of one of the sterner sex would be a constraint upon the interesting *coterie*. And therefore I am excluded."

Florence, satisfied with this answer, hastened away to her own apartment to prepare for the visit and the moment she had quitted the drawing-room. Pauline said to her husband, "Do you not think, Gabriel, that you had better accompany us after all?"

"If you wish it, my dear Pauline," was the reply, as the nobleman gazed affectionately upon his handsome wife. "But I think that I have already convinced you it would be more becoming for yourself to accompany Florence alone. In that cold reserve which you may exhibit towards the Prince, Florence will see naught save the distant respect which a lady would naturally show in the presence of his Royal Highness. But were I to find myself in the company of the Prince, I could scarcely manifest even the most ordinary politeness. For though years and years have passed since the date of poor Octavia's wrongs, and also of the base outrages which he dared—though so fruitlessly—attempt towards yourself, yet is the memory of them immortal with me! All things considered, therefore, you would do well to go alone with Florence. Besides, you say that although the Princess Sophia will not be present at the interview, yet she has promised that the Master of her Household shall attend upon you——"

"Oh; it was not through any fear that I proposed you should accompany us," exclaimed Pauline. "Even were his Royal Highness inclined to renew towards me, either by word or look, the insults of by-gone times, the presence of his daughter would assuredly prove an adequate check. Or else," added Pauline in a more serious tone, "must he indeed be far, far more depraved than we even know him to be."

Lady Florimel now retired to perform the little requisites of her own toilette, and at half-past twelve her ladyship and

Florence stepped into the carriage. In a few minutes they were set down at St. James's Palace—that dingy, rambling ignoble-looking old brick building the exterior of which has the appearance of a tumbling down barrack, but upon whose interior hundreds and thousands of pounds have been expended to minister to the extravagance, the pomp, and the parade of Royalty. Poor unfortunate working classes! how have ye been doomed to the most crushing toil in order to furnish forth the splendour of those palaces which exist as the trophies of that tyranny which has achieved your wretchedness and slavery!

On alighting at St. James's Palace, Lady Florimel and the Honourable Miss Eaton were received by Sir Robert Conway, the Master of the Princess Sophia's Household. This gentleman was about sixty years of age—of courtly appearance—and one who had spent all his life as a hanger-on of Royalty. He had passed through all those grades of aristocratic flunkiness which belong to the hierarchy of Royal Households—having gradually risen from Page of the Back Stairs, through the various phases of Page of the Front Stairs, Silver Stick, Gold Stick, Groom of the Stole, and heaven knows what beside in the service of the King, until he settled down into the comfortable place which we now find him occupying about the person of the Princess Sophia.

Heavens! what annals of the Court were contained in this man's memory. All the cells of his brain were so many encyclopædias, filled with Court anecdotes, intrigues, scandals, depravities and scoundrelisms. How many villainies amongst proud nobles had he been the means of hushing up!—how many frailties on the part of highborn ladies had he been instrumental in veiling from the public eye! How many noble lords had he known who were the most ignoble rascals on the face of God's earth!—how many Maids of Honour had he seen in his time who were no maids at all!—how many gentlemen of the bed-chamber had he been acquainted with, whose private deeds were so ungentlemanly that even at Crockford's den of infamy they were scouted as blacklegs!—how many Ladies-in-Waiting had he known who were so unladylike as to prefer their husband's grooms to their husbands themselves!—how many Royal Highness had he bowed to, who by their conduct deserved to have been styled Royal Basenesses!

Then was he not also—this Sir Robert Conway—a veritable perambulating Court

Guide—a peripatetic *Blue Book* of the Aristocracy? He knew everybody and everything in the spheres of the Court, High Life, and Fashion. Did anybody happen to say in his presence. "By the bye, who did Lord Cranbury marry?"—he would immediately have the answer ready to fall from the tip of his tongue, to the effect, for example's sake, that "the Right Honourable Augustus Octavius Stanhope St. James, sixth Earl of Cranbury, married the Honourable Miranda Amelia Jacintha Constantina Arlington, third daughter of Fitzallan Seymour Portman Aulet, third Baron Rochdale, who married Lady Eliza Alexandrina Catherina Marietta Berkeley." In all other Court and Aristocratic matters, even to the minutest details of pedigree and genealogy, was this Master of the Household equally well versed and precise: and for this reason he was considered in the highest circles to be one of the cleverest men in all England. Indeed, a professor of a hundred different languages, half-a-dozen sciences and as many arts, would not have obtained half the repute for talent and learning that was enjoyed by this wretched humdrum on the strength of the most trumpery, worthless, and debasing kind of knowledge to which a man could possibly degrade his intellect.

This great personage it was who received Lady Florimel and Miss Florence Eaton as they alighted from their carriage at St. James's Palace; and he forthwith conducted them to a magnificent saloon belonging to the suite of apartment occupied by the Princess Sophia. On introducing the ladies into the presence of the Princess, Sir Robert Conway withdrew: and her Royal Highness received her visitants with the kindest cordiality. Luncheon was immediately served: and when it was over, the Princess said, "Now, my dear Lady Florimel, I will summon Sir Robert Conway to escort you and your sweet niece to the State Apartments: but as I myself am somewhat indisposed, I hope you will excuse me from accompanying you."

The Master of the Household was accordingly sent for; and he speedily made his appearance—all bowings and scrapings, smiles and willingness—to conduct the ladies whithersoever they chose. Accordingly, Lady Florimel and Florence accompanied him to the State Apartments, which we shall not pause to describe: much less shall we linger to chronicle one single word of all the encomia which Sir Robert Conway lavished upon every feature of

those rooms. Suffice it to say that Florence, in the artless simplicity of her character and with that natural good taste which has been fostered by her aunt, was much disappointed at finding far more of gingerbread tinsel than of sterling decorations, and much more gilding and gaudiness than works of art and masterpieces of the limner's pencil.

Having finished the inspection of the State Apartments, Sir Robert Conway, who had already received his cue from the Princess Sophia proposed to introduce the ladies to an apartment well known as the King's Closet. This room was the one where the British Sovereigns were wont to transact private business on the occasion of Levees, Drawing Rooms, &c., held at James's Palace: and in that apartment many of the most diabolical laws and decrees have at different times received the royal signature.

Into this room did the Master of the Household now conduct Lady Florimel and Florence Eaton. Pauline, who knew what was to happen, had some difficulty in concealing certain amount of agitation and excitement which arose from the prospect of the interview that was now close at hand. As for Florence—totally unsuspecting whom she was about to meet, she followed her aunt in gay and cheerful confidence: but when Sir Robert Conway, on throwing open the door, exclaimed "Good heavens! what have I done? the Prince Regent is here!"—the lovely girl trembled all over at the sudden idea of finding herself face to face with his Royal Highness. Oh! if she had only known—if she had only entertained the slightest scintillation of a suspicion that the Prince was in reality her father—the author of her being,—how different would have been her emotions, how far more solemnly and pathetically interesting this hour of her life!

As a matter of course, Sir Robert Conway affected to be overwhelmed with confusion in observing the Prince Regent in the Royal Closet: Pauline likewise stepped back a few paces, but with a really natural recoil from the destroyer of her sister, and not with any affected surprise or alarm—while her young, timid, and beautiful niece clung to her arm in vague terror lest this intrusion on their part should be visited by some unpleasant remonstrance.

The Prince, who as a matter of course through prearrangement had been located in the Royal Closet, now stepped forward, and with that easy yet elegant assurance

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which characterized him, at once exclaimed, "Do not be alarmed, my dear Conway! I presume you have brought these ladies hither to view the apartment: and they shall not be disappointed."

"May it please your Royal Highness," said the courtly Conway, with a low bow "Lady Florimel and her niece the Honourable Miss Eaton will present their duty to your Royal Highness."

Pauline bowed with a matron's dignity, accompanied by a due amount of respectful courtesy; and Florence recovering her presence of mind at the reassuring words of the Prince, made a graceful salutation. This homage on the part of the ladies was acknowledged by what the Court newsman would call "the most gracious condescension" on the part of the Prince. At the same time he flung upon Pauline a look which seemed to say, "I hope there is no longer any ill-feeling between us:" and then his eyes settled upon his lovely, angelic, blushing daughter—that daughter who knew not that she thus stood in her father's presence! But at the same moment—as he beheld that heavenly creature whose charms so far transcended all the representations which rumour had wafted to his ears, and on whose pure and candid brow chastity sate enthroned in alabaster, while vestal innocence beamed in her azure eyes as the sunlight shines in the clear blue of heaven,—as the Prince, we say, thus gazed upon that sweet ethereal creature, he experienced the father's pride—the parent's joy:—and in a moment of uncontrollable and ineffable feeling, he drew forth a small case enclosing the miniature of Octavia the injured, wronged, and perished mother of that lovely girl!

Florence surveyed the Prince, with the utmost surprise as she witnessed this proceeding; and Pauline, instantly stepping a pace backward, so as to get behind Florence, made rapid and impatient sign to the Prince to warn him of the imprudence of his conduct and chide him for this demonstration of feeling which under the circumstances he ought to have avoided. As for Sir Robert Conway, he stood drawn up in an attitude of attention—but, courtier-like and also child-like, prepared to hear, see, and say nothing.

Perhaps it was one of the few fine moments of the Prince's life, when he thus became suddenly plaint and ductile to the influence of a father's feelings, and forgetting the necessity of caution, acknowledged the spontaneous sway of nature over the colder sentiment of prudence. It was one of the very few pathetic chapters in his

history: and even Pauline, while signalling him to beware what he did, could not help thinking to herself, "This is at least some atonement made to the memory of my deceased sister!"

Scarcely had the Prince yielded to that sudden and irresistible impulse which thus made him draw forth the miniature portrait of the long dead Octavia, in order to compare it with the living beauty that was now in his presence—when the amazed and even startled look which Florence fixed upon him reminded him of his imprudence, even before he observed the signs which Lady Florimel was making. No sooner, therefore, had he opened that case and glanced upon that miniature—no sooner, indeed had his eyes travelled from the features of the mother as perpetuated by the limner's art, to those of the daughter brilliant with the animation of youthful life,—when he closed the case again: and returning it to his pocket, instantaneously took the hand of Florence, saying, "Pardon me, young lady—pardon me—but you suddenly reminded me of a dear friend now no more!"

Florence became overwhelmed with confusion—almost with dismay: for she felt that the Prince's hand trembled nervously as he held her own—and there was something so peculiar, so touching, so appealing, at the moment in his looks, that she experienced the strangest and most unaccountable feeling springing up in her heart. It was as if all in a moment she became deeply interested in this Prince whom she had never seen before. But Ah! little did she suspect that it was nature asserting its empire within her gentle bosom, and influencing her with those promptings that were so mysterious, so inscrutable, and so profound!

"Permit us to retire, sir," now interjected Lady Florimel, "fearful that the scene might go to such a length as to excite suspicion in the mind of Florence and render some explanation indispensable for the purpose of allaying it."

"Lady Florimel," said the Prince, fixing his looks upon her in a peculiar manner, "I hope that your noble husband and yourself will some day favour the reception-rooms at Carlton House with your presence, and that you will be accompanied by your amiable niece?"

Pauline bowed, but gave no reply: then taking the hand of Florence, she whispered hastily, "Let us withdraw."

"The young lady's thoughts were thrown into such confusion by the Prince's manner, the words he had addressed to her,

and the emotions which they had suddenly conjured up, that she scarcely knew what she was doing: but mechanically making a graceful salutation she suffered her aunt to lead her from the room. Sir Robert Conway followed: and when they reached the Princess Sophia's apartment, Florence was so overcome by the powerful yet unaccountable agitation of her feelings, that she burst into tears. Lady Florimel threw a rapid glance upon the Princess, as much as to say, "Did I not prophesy some such result as this?"—and her Royal Highness shook her head to express her regret that she should have been the means of bringing about this interview between the father and the daughter.

"My dear girl," said Pauline, in the kindest and most soothing manner to Florence, "what afflicts you thus? what feeling causes these tears?"

"Pardon me, my dear aunt," murmured Florence, hastily wiping her eyes; "and intercede on my behalf that her Royal Highness shall forgive me this foolish conduct of mine in her presence. But I could not help it! Some feeling came over me stronger than myself—a feeling for which I could not account at the time, and which I am still less able to explain now. It was a temporary weakness a transitory depression of spirits—produced, most probably, by that sudden excitement which seemed to take possession of his Royal Highness the Prince. But I feel better now: indeed I am quite recovered—and again do I implore your pardon."

"You have not offended us, my dear girl," said the Princess Sophia, rising from her seat and taking the young maiden's hand in the kindest manner.

To be brief, Florence Eaton speedily recovered her wonted cheerfulness: and in a short time a footman entered to announce that the carriage had arrived. Lady Florimel and her niece resumed their bonnets and scarves, took leave of the Princess, and entered to drive round Hyde Park ere returning home.

While proceeding to that fashionable lounge maintained by the people's money to enable the Aristocracy of London to display their gorgeous equipages and sumptuous apparel, Florence continued to discourse upon the singular incidents of the meeting in the Royal Closet. She expressed her pity for the Prince who had been so deeply moved at *having the features of a lost friend recalled to his memory*; and with a natural artlessness she observed that any one who could be so moved, must possess a very excellent disposition. Pauline

was vexed to hear her talk in this manner: for she saw that the incident had made a deep impression upon the young maiden's mind, and she did not wish any occurrence to disturb the even tenour of that existence which had hitherto passed in such serene and tranquil happiness. Moreover, Pauline was naturally fearful of her niece obtaining any clue to the discovery of the secret of her birth: for sad—Oh! sad indeed would it be for this innocent unsophisticated child of nature to have her mind lightened as to the past and be taught the history of a mother's shame!

The carriage had entered Hyde Park: and Lady Florimel was thinking how she should turn the conversation into another channel, when suddenly loud cries of alarm burst from the lips of several persons walking on the footways on either side of the road; and at the same instant the coachman reined in his horses abruptly. But a crash simultaneously occurred: fresh ejaculations of terror were heard—the horses of Lord Florimel's carriage were plunging violently—and several people were rushing to the spot. Pauline and Florence greatly affrighted looked forth from the windows; and the cause of the stoppage, confusion and alarming cries was immediately apparent. A gentleman driving a magnificent horse in a gig, had found the animal, all in a moment becoming unmanageable, shying at a white pocket handkerchief which somebody had let fall and which was blowing across the road. Thus suddenly swerving aside, the spirited steed had come in furious collision with the horses of Lady Florimel's carriage. The gig was upset—the gentleman was thrown out and either killed upon the spot, or stunned—and the maddened animal dashed away fleet as an arrow, dragging the vehicle like a thing of no weight behind him.

Such was the incident which occurred all in a moment to turn the thoughts alike of Pauline and Florence into a new channel. The footman who stood behind the carriage, instantaneously leaped down and joined the persons who had rushed to the spot to render their assistance. The gentleman, on being raised from the ground, was discovered to have been only stunned—not killed. The footman, stepping up to the carriage window, reported this intelligence to Pauline who at once directed that the gentleman should be lifted into the chariot. But who was he? No one on the spot at the moment knew him: it was therefore impossible to convey him to his own residence—and Pauline

commanded the carriage to proceed home to Florimel House in Piccadilly.

A few minutes brought the equipage thither; and the gentleman, who still remained insensible, was lifted into the mansion—conveyed to a chamber—and surrounded by all possible attentions. Medical aid was procured: and in a short time the sufferer was somewhat restored to consciousness—but not sufficiently to speak and the physicians, while declaring that no fatal result need be dreaded, nevertheless desired that he should be kept perfectly tranquil, as he had evidently received a severe shock from the fall.

When the first excitement attending this incident had somewhat subsided, Lord Florimel bethought himself of searching the stranger's pockets for the purpose of ascertaining, if possible, who he was—as his relations or friends might be uneasy at his absence. His card-case was found: and thence was it discovered that the handsome young invalid—for both good looking and youthful he assuredly was, as we might have observed before—was Mr. Malvern of Hanover Square.

CHAPTER CVIII.

THE PRINCESS CHARLOTTE.

Scarcely had Lady Florimel's carriage rolled out of the court-yard of St. James's Palace, when another equipage, drawn by four horses, dashed into the enclosure. The royal arms were upon the panels of this magnificent barouche: the postillions were clad in elegant jockey-attire of sky-blue and three tall footmen in the royal liveries stood behind the carriage.

The moment this equipage appeared, great excitement immediately became visible amongst all the officials, lacqueys, and dependants who had previously been lounging about in the court-yard and entrance-hall of the palace. But now two lines of bowing individuals were speedily formed from the carriage-door to the entrance of the building; and Sir Robert Conway who came hurrying forward, arrived just in time to assist a young lady to alight. Then, with profound respect and veneration, the old courtier offered this young lady his arm, which she took with unaffected ease and affability of manner,—acknowledging with a graceful inclination of her head the low bows made by the two lines of dependants, as she passed between them into the palace. Three ladies-in-waiting likewise

descended from the carriage and followed close behind their youthful mistress: for this young lady who has just arrived at St. James's Palace, and whom we now for the first time introduce to our readers, is the Princess Charlotte, the daughter of the Prince Regent and the injured Caroline of Brunswick!

Strange coincidence! that on the same day, at the same hour, and within a few minutes of each other, the illegitimate daughter of the Prince Regent—namely Florence Eaton—and his legitimate daughter, the Princess Charlotte, should thus visit St. James's Palace!

And here we must pause for a little space to describe her Royal Highness the Princess Charlotte, who was now just eighteen years of age. Handsome she was, assuredly,—yet not endowed with that sweet, nymph-like, and angelic beauty, which characterized Florence Eaton; but invested with that peculiar style of loveliness—sleepy, luxuriant, and sensuous—which has already been described in an earlier chapter as distinctive of the females belonging to the family of Guelph. Her figure, even at this early age, was already of a richness merging upon embonpoint—but not sufficiently so to diminish its graces. There was however a voluptuousness in its contours which was enhanced by the complete exposure of the shoulders and neck, according to the fashion of the time. Short of stature, the Princess had little of girlhood's suppleness and lightness of movement: her slow pace and matron-like gait arose not from any idea of maintaining a dignified bearing, but from the circumstances that in her nature she was what Byron has described as "somewhat languishing and lazy."

Her hair—of a light chestnut, soft as silk and fine in its individual filaments—was far from profuse in quantity, and was worn in frizzly ringlets at the sides, but carelessly gathered up in a knot behind the head. Her complexion was beautifully fair, with an animated bloom upon the cheeks, making them resemble in her healthful plumpness the ripe peach with its mingled damask and vermeil. Her features could not be called regular not yet classical, and they were also too large and striking for a delicate beauty—the nose being prominent, the lips full and sensuous,—and the chin rounded with boldness belonging to a profile that indicates strong passions. Her eyes were of a light blue, and looked soft, languishing, and even wanton from beneath their drooping lids: the eyebrows were light, and indeed too

delicately pencilled to give a classic finish to the opal of the temples.

To judge more minutely still of the character of the Princess Charlotte from the usual physical indications, we may add that benevolence, generosity, and goodness of heart were in her looks: while an occasional bridding up of the head, a quick flashing of the eye from the midst of its languid expression, and a sudden flushing of the countenance, showed that she possessed a temper impatient of contradiction and which in time might even become overbearing and despotic.

We have said that her Royal Highness was attired in a very low dress: but as a matter of course it was not with her shoulders and bosom thus exposed that she had arrived in the carriage. An elegant scarf was thrown lightly over her neck: and a veil depended from the hat which she wore. This hat was of beaver, with large brims, and black plumes; and being worn gracefully, it suited well the somewhat bold and masculine style of her features.

On reaching the landing that communicated with the apartments of the Princess Sophia, the Princess Charlotte quitted the arm of Sir Robert Conway, and passed into a dressing-room, followed by her ladies-in-waiting. There she laid aside her splendid hat and her elegant scarf of purple velvet with its gold fringe; and dispensing with the attendance of her ladies, she proceeded alone to the apartment where the Princess Sophia was seated. The meeting between the aunt and the niece was most affectionate; and when they had exchanged the usual greetings, the Princess Charlotte requested Sophia to dismiss her ladies who were in attendance. This was immediately done; and the royal aunt and niece remained alone together.

We must here observe that for some years past the Princess Charlotte had not resided with her father the Prince Regent: she dwelt principally with the King and Queen at Windsor or Frogmore. That is to say, she was in reality under the protection of old Queen Charlotte, his Majesty George III being at the time a hopeless lunatic. The young Princess did not often repair to London, save when in the company of the Queen: but occasionally she would make a special trip to St. James's Palace, to visit her aunts who had apartments there; and it was often observed in courtly circles, rumoured throughout the West End, and even hinted at times by the newspaper-press, that on such occasions her Royal Highness very seldom

called at Carlton House, but saw her father the Prince Regent at St. James's. We may add that of all the Royal Family the Princess Sophia was Charlotte's favourite relative: and to this much-loved aunt was she wont to confide all her cares, anxieties, and troubles.

Not many days had elapsed since the Princess Charlotte had paid Sophia one of these flying visits to which we have alluded: and therefore her appearance at St. James's after so brief an interval, and the request which she now made for the dismissal of the waiting-ladies from the room—added to a certain pre-occupation which was visible in her manner—convinced Sophia that something unpleasant had occurred.

"My dear Charlotte," accordingly said the aunt, the moment her ladies had quitted the apartment: "has anything happened to cause you fresh uneasiness?"

"Oh! my dear aunt," exclaimed the young Princess bursting into tears: "how can I tell you what has occurred? how can I wound your heart so deeply as to speak ill of that mother whom I know you love so fondly?"

"Tell me everything, my dear niece," said the Princess Sophia; "and do not regard my feelings at all. Tell me what has happened! You know that I would do anything to serve you. But come, dry these tears! Should any one enter unexpectedly and see you weeping——"

"Oh! let me weep—let me weep, my dear aunt!" cried the Princess Charlotte, now literally wringing her hands in anguish. "These tears afford a vent for that sorrow which would otherwise cause my heart to burst. For, Oh! this pent-up affliction which circumstances so often compel me to restrain, seems at times to become a consuming flame and to prey upon my very vitals——"

"Heavens! dear Charlotte," cried the Princess Sophia, now very seriously alarmed: "I know that you grieve on account of your mother—but never, never have I heard you speak so despondingly as at present! Surely, surely, something terrible has happened——"

"Yes—something terrible indeed!" interrupted the Princess; "something of so grave and so serious a nature that I question whether I shall ever return to Windsor again—whether indeed I shall not steal out of England in disguise, and hasten to join my poor dear persecuted mother in Italy!"

"For God's sake, compose yourself, dearest Charlotte!" said the Princess

Sophia, in the most soothing manner possible. "Instead of giving way to this painful excitement, tell me what has occurred—favour me with your confidence, as you have hitherto been wont to do—allow me to give you my advice, and promise me that you will follow it."

"But how will you advise me against your own mother?" exclaimed the young Princess imperiously.

"If my mother be acting wrongly," was the mild and gently remonstrative answer, "I will not scruple to condemn her proceedings as candidly and impartially as I would those of an utter stranger. Far more readily, then, would I protect you, my beloved niece, against even the machinations of my own mother—if such machinations were in progress!"

"Pardon me—pardon me, dearest aunt!" exclaimed the Princess Charlotte, with a gush of fervid feeling and grateful enthusiasm: "pardon me, I say, for having mistrusted you for a moment—but I felt at the time as if there were no longer any confidence to be bestowed on a single being upon earth!"

"Tell me, Charlotte," said the Princess Sophia, what it is that has affected you so painfully—so profoundly."

"I will endeavour to restrain my feelings in such a manner," answered the young Princess, "as to enable me to give you a calm and intelligible narrative of what has occurred. You know that at Windsor Castle I have free access on all occasions to the Queen's private apartments, and that it is never considered necessary for me to send and announce my intention of visiting her Majesty in her own room. You are likewise aware that her Majesty is particularly fond at this time of the year, when the weather is so cold, of sitting in the little room which she calls *the boudoir*, and which has double doors. Well, at about eleven o'clock this forenoon I repaired as usual to pay my respects to her Majesty, forgetting to ask previously whether she was alone. On reaching the boudoir, I found the outer door ajar—and perhaps you remember how noiselessly it opens? Certain it is that when I opened it the sound could not have been heard inside the room; for the voices that were in conversation did not cease speaking. On hearing those voices, and recognising one to be the Queen's, I was immediately on the point of retiring, under the impression that her Majesty was engaged, when something which fell from her lips suddenly transfixed me to the spot. The words were to this effect:—'But my dear

Mrs. Owen we have gone too far to retreat: the ruin of the Princess Caroline is resolved upon: it must be accomplished—and I am determined that she shall never, never have a chance of being Queen of England.'—Oh! as these dreadful syllables met mine ears, a cold tremor seized upon me—I shivered violently from head to foot and should have fallen had I not actually clung to the door-post for support. Then with a mighty effort I so far conquered my emotions as to remain an eager, breathless listener. It was now Mrs. Owen—a name I had sometimes heard before—who spoke. 'I am well aware' she said, 'of the truth of your Majesty's observation, that we have gone much too far to retreat: but what I dread is exposure—and this alarm I entertain not merely for my own sake but that of every one implicated in the business. That meddling youngman's escape from the agents of the French Prefect—' Here the Queen interrupted Mrs. Owen, exclaiming, 'You are sure that the intelligence is correct'—'Beyond all possibility of doubt,' replied Mrs. Owen: 'here is the letter which the Prefect of Police in Paris has written to the Marquis of Leveson acquainting him with all that is known of the rescue and escape.'—Then as I still remained spell-bound at the threshold of the boudoir, I could hear the rustling of a paper, as of a letter being opened; and then a pause ensued in the conversation, so that I felt assured the Queen was reading the letter which Mrs. Owen appeared to have put into her hands. Wherefore did I not fly from that spot? Oh! cannot you comprehend the terrible nature of that curiosity which thus retained me there? And now I was shivering with a chill no longer, but trembling with a burning fever; for the blood was pouring like molten lead through my veins. Eagerly, intensely did I listen to catch the next words that might be uttered. At length the Queen spoke again. She had evidently finished the perusal of the letter. 'Who could have been the authors of that rescue?' she said, in the quick, sharp, querulous tone which she adopts when labouring under apprehension or annoyance. 'You see,' she continued, 'it is quite clear from the report made by the police agents to the Prefect, that the plot must have been deeply laid, and that they were Englishmen who accomplished the rescue. Who could they have been!'—'That is the mystery, and likewise the source of alarm,' observed Mrs. Owen. 'Certain it is that there are now several people who

are acquainted with the whole plot which we have been conducting for years past : for of course the self-styled Jocelyn Loftus did not fail to tell everything to his friends after his rescue, even if they did not know all particulars before.—Which was most probable,” added the Queen, in a still more bitter tone of vexation : *‘or else how could they have known he was a prisoner under such circumstances and wherefore should they have attempted to rescue him ? What can have become of him ?’*—Mrs. Owen, in reply, proceeded to remind the Queen that this young man whom they called Jocelyn Loftus, was engaged to be married to a young lady named Louisa Stanley, residing at Canterbury : and it appears also from what Mrs. Owen said, that her youngest daughter—Mary by name is staying with that same Miss Stanley. *“I have allowed Mary,”* observed Mrs. Owen, *‘to remain there unmolested, because she is buried in a seclusion where she has no opportunity of revealing our secrets in a manner calculated to do us any more harm than she has already done.’* Mrs. Owen likewise proceeded to observe that she hated her youngest daughter, and should never again be able to bear the sight of her, *‘because she had proved so disobedient.’*

“But heavens ! my dear aunt,” said the Princess, “in what think you that this disobedience consisted ?”

“I know not, my dear Charlotte,” returned the Princess Sophia, who had listened with a profoundly mournful interest to the preceding narrative. Pray continue : this is indeed a dreadful recital.”

“Dreadful !” echoed the Princess Charlotte, hastily wiping the tears from her eyes and assuming a forced composure. From the conversation which ensued between Mrs. Owen and the Queen, I learnt that for years past a fearful conspiracy had been in existence—a conspiracy—My God ! for what object ?—Oh ! to accomplish the ruin of my poor mother ! In this conspiracy the Queen, three or four noblemen, several titled ladies, and this Mrs. Owen have been leagued : and what is worse—Oh ! ten thousand times worse—my father the Prince Regent is deep in that same conspiracy against his own wife ! Aye and more too—Alas ! my dear aunt that I should have to afflict you by these communications : but to you alone can I confide my sorrows—from you alone can I expect sympathy ! I have named some of the conspirators : but in addition to the list, I must specify my two uncles, the Dukes of—”

And here the voice of the young Princess was lost in sobs as she murmured the two names.

“O heavens ! this is terrible—terrible !” exclaimed the Princess Sophia, clasping her hands.

“Now you can understand my sorrow, and you can sympathise with me !” said the unhappy young Princess Charlotte. “That I should be compelled thus to speak to you concerning your own mother and your brothers—”

“Is scarcely so dreadful,” interrupted the Princess, Sophia, “as for you, my dear niece, to have learnt so much evil of your own father ! But pray proceed. Frightful as the narrative is, I am nevertheless impelled by a mournful interest to hear it all.”

“I have already told you,” resumed the Princess Charlotte, “that this conspiracy has been progressing for years. You are aware—of course you are—that in 1806 certain grave and serious charges were made against my poor mother. I was only ten years of age at the time, and was too young to know what was going on : but still I knew, even then, that my poor mother was unhappy—or when taken to see her at Blackheath, I noticed—child as I was—that she cried bitterly, very bitterly ! You know, my dear aunt that the charges made against her at the time of which I am speaking, all fell to the ground : not one could be maintained—they were the basest fabrications—the vilest inventions of calumny ! This I have of course learnt only within the last few years : but it was reserved for this day’s incident to reveal to me the astounding fact that those charges, made against my poor mother in 1806, resulted from the schemes of the conspirators whom I have named !”

“Oh ! aurely you must be labouring under some terrible misapprehension ?” exclaimed the Princess Sophia, contemplating her niece in dismay.

“No : all that I am telling you did I glean from the discourse which took place between the Queen and Mrs. Owen this morning. But that is not all,” exclaimed the Princess Charlotte, with another powerful and painful effort to subdue a passionate outburst of those feelings that were struggling to find a vent. “At this present moment Mr. Owen’s three eldest daughters are engaged in carrying out the schemes of the conspirators : and it is because the youngest daughter Mary recoiled in horror from the same detestable service when it was proposed to her—it is for this reason that she is hated by her

mother, rendered homeless, and made dependent on the generosity of that Miss Louisa Stanley whose name I have already mentioned. Oh! you perceive, my dear aunt, that this morning has been fraught with terrible revelations for me! And can you wonder if I ere now expressed a doubt whether I would ever return to Windsor again—or whether I would not quit England, repair to Italy, and not only warn my beloved mother of the perils which surround her, but likewise remain with her henceforth to sooth and solace her?"

"No—you must not leave England, dear niece," said the Princess Sophia. "Such a course could only lead to a scandal and an exposure that might involve the whole Royal Family in utter ruin. You have sought my advice, and you shall have it: you shall have my best assistance also—but believe me, the utmost caution and circumspection must be used. Tell me however whether anything farther took place between Mrs. Owen and my mother this morning, and how their interview terminated."

"Mrs. Owen reminded her Majesty, as I just now said," resumed the Princess Charlotte, "of the circumstance that the young gentleman whom they spoke of as Jocelyn Loftus was engaged to be married to that Miss Louisa Stanley with whom Mary Owen is staying at Canterbury. Mrs. Owen therefore suggested that it was very probable Jocelyn Loftus, on his escape from the hands of the French authorities, would fly back to England and hasten to convince his beloved Louisa of his safety. That he would take this step instead of hurrying on to Italy, Mrs. Owen suggested as more than probable; and the Queen appeared to fall into the same view of the matter. They therefore buoyed themselves up with this hope: and from some farther remarks which they made, it seems as if they cared not if Jocelyn Loftus should content himself with merely writing a warning letter to my dear mother in Italy, inasmuch as my mother is so completely surrounded by the creatures and tools of the conspirators, that the correspondence addressed to her is subjected to the most rigid scrutiny, and all letters calculated to open her eyes to the dangers of her position, are carefully suppressed."

"I could not have believed my mother capable of such wickedness," said the Princess Sophia, terribly afflicted and profoundly humiliated at being thus compelled to listen to the recital of a parent's iniquities.

"'Tis, alas! all too true," observed the Princess Charlotte. "And, Oh!" she exclaimed, bursting into tears, "how shall I ever be able to meet my father again, otherwise than to overwhelm him with reproaches for his conduct towards my mother? For observe, my dear aunt," she cried, suddenly wiping away her tears and evidently deriving solace from the thought which had just struck her and to which she was about to give utterance,—“not once, throughout that long conversation which I overheard this morning did either the Queen or Mrs. Owen venture to impute a single crime to my poor mother! On the contrary, it is because the conspirators know her to be virtuous that they are compelled to invent imputations against her and suborn perjurers to weave the meshes of circumstantial evidence around her in order to consummate her ruin. The mere existence of this conspiracy without even all the frightful details that have come to my knowledge would be sufficient to prove my mother's innocence and virtue. Then wherefore is she thus persecuted? why have I been for years separated from her? At first, when I was a child, I was told that it was not consistent with my rank as lineal heiress to the throne to be brought up under my parents' care; and knowing no better, but, believing what I was told, I repined not. But as I grew up, misgivings relative to the truth of those representations entered my mind; and as you are well aware, my dear aunt, I have for the last two or three years been much afflicted—much grieved—not only at being separated from both my parents but also because they themselves are separated! You know," added the Princess Charlotte with the fervid eloquence of feelings deeply moved, "that such have been my griefs!"

"I know it, alas! too well," exclaimed the Princess Sophia, throwing her arms round the neck of her young and handsome niece. "I know it, beloved Charlotte—for you have poured forth all your woes into my bosom, and I have done my best to console you!"

"Yes—you have been a dear fond relative to me," replied the royal niece, affectionately returning the aunt's caresses. "How often have you sustained my drooping spirit! and how valuable have been your lessons, in teaching me the necessity of assuming a demeanour calculated to prevent the giddy throng of rank and fashion from conjecturing who painful were the gnawing of affliction at my heart's core! But this is not the time and these

are not the circumstances" she suddenly exclaimed, "for me to give way to grief. I must study how to act for the best—and you, my dear aunt must counsel me."

"But you have not told me all that occurred in the Queen's boudoir?" remarked Sophia.

"Oh! these frequent interruptions which the gush of feeling occasions;" cried the Princess Charlotte. "The discourse between her Majesty and Mrs. Owen was long and serious—embracing so many points that it gave me the completest insight into the whole conspiracy. But they resolved upon nothing definite—unless it were to ascertain without delay whether the young gentleman whom they called Jocelyn Loftus, be really at Canterbury or not. At length Mrs. Owen rose to depart; and I fled away from the vicinage of thy boudoir. Hastening to my own apartments, I ordered the carriage—dressed myself in a hurry—and came direct from Windsor to St. James's to consult with you my best friend and kindest relative!"

"I have already urged the absolute necessity of prudence and caution," said the Princess Sophia. "Unfortunately, my dear Charlotte, the monarchical institutions of this country are becoming unpopular with the great mass of the people. The establishment of a Republic in North America and the tremendous impulse given to liberal ideas by the French Revolution, have set millions a-thinking in this country. The consequence is that Royalty is menaced on every side: its end is approaching—and those who are anxious to precipitate the catastrophe, rejoice in each new suicidal act which Royalty itself commits. Every crime, every vice, every frailty, every misdeed connected with Royalty that can be dragged forth by its enemies to the public eyes, constitutes one of its suicidal acts and becomes a nail which it is knocking in its own coffin. It is not therefore for you, my dear Charlotte to do aught to accelerate the ruin of that throne, whereon you hope to sit; and hence the absolute necessity for caution—the utmost caution indeed, under present circumstances."

"But something must be done!" cried the young Princess, who had listened with the utmost impatience to her aunt's somewhat lengthened address, "I cannot suffer my poor mother to remain environed by these fearful perils. If I write to her a warning letter, it will be intercepted——"

"An idea has struck me?" ejaculated the Princess Sophia. "It is evident that this Mr. Jocelyn Loftus is a generous-hearted, chivalrous young man—one who

is resolved to become the champion of your mother against her enemies. Arguing from a knowledge of the human heart, it is indeed most probable that after his rescue from the French authorities, he has sped back to England to embrace his beloved Louisa and personally assure her of his safety. I will at all events write this very day to Canterbury——"

"You will write to Mr. Loftus?" exclaimed the Princess Charlotte, eagerly and thankfully.

"Yes, I will write to him," resumed the royal aunt: "I will beseech him to come up to London at once and hold a conference with me—a conference at which you, my dear niece, shall be present;—and then we will settle some decisive plan for the protection of your dear mother against her enemies."

"Yes—this is the best course to pursue," exclaimed the Princess Charlotte, again flinging herself into Sophia's arms and embracing her affectionately. "Alas! alas!" she continued, the tears once more streaming down her cheeks: "sad—very sad is my poor mother's destiny! You must know, my dear aunt, that although everybody observes such caution when speaking in my hearing, there are nevertheless times when I cannot help catching things which were never meant to reach me and sometimes, too, I glean from newspapers such strange allegations and unmistakable allusions——"

"Concerning whom, my dear girl?" demanded the Princess Sophia, anxiously.

"Concerning my own father, the Prince Regent of the Kingdom!" was the response, delivered with so profound a melancholy that it was evident the young Princess deeply felt the consciousness of her sire's profligacy. "I know many things which perhaps, at my age and in my position, I ought not to know," she continued. "I know, for instance, that during the long years which have elapsed since my father's separation from my mother, he has been leading a life which reflects no honour upon him as a parent, a husband, or a Prince. I know that many and many a titled dame belonging to the Royal Court, has been too intimate with him: and I know also that Lady Sackville is the present Royal Favourite at Carlton House, and that her will, if she choose to assert it, may not only become law there but also throughout the British empire. Can I wonder then, my dear aunt, to hear you tell me that Royalty is suffering in the estimation of the people of this country?"

"Would to heaven, my dear Charlotte,"

exclaimed the Princess Sophia, her own feelings now worked up to the most painful degree of excitement: for she felt—deeply, poignantly felt—that she herself was far from immaculate, and that the discovery of her dishonour had tended amongst other overwhelming misfortunes to render her own father, George III, a hopeless lunatic; “would to heaven that such topics as those to which you have alluded, had never been forced upon your thoughts! Oh! my dear niece, you are too young—too good—to have such reflections thrust as it were upon your innocent contemplation——”

“Reflections which destroy all the innocence of the soul!” interrupted Charlotte bitterly. “Where is the generous confidence of my youthfulness? It is gone—gone and never can be restored! Often do I think of those apples which grow upon the banks of the Dead Sea, and which though fair and beautiful to gaze upon, nevertheless contain naught but corruption and rottenness. May not the British Court be likened unto one of those deceptive fruits?—for, alas! my dear aunt, it is not concerning my father only that startling whispers have sometimes reached my ears and distressing allusions in the newspapers have met mine eyes, but there is scarcely a member of the Royal Family concerning whom I have not recently heard or read something calculated to shock or scare me!”

“Good heavens! what mean you, dear girl?” demanded the Princess Sophia, surveying her niece with terrified amazement: for knowing how many dreadful things might be told relative to her parents, her brothers, her sisters, and even herself, Sophia was naturally stricken with horrible suspense as to how much of all those fearful truths had come to the knowledge of her niece.

“Oh! wherefore should I annoy and distress you, my dear aunt, more than I have already done?” exclaimed the Princess Charlotte, now evidently chagrined at having made her last observation.

“But you *must* tell me, my dear child, what you have heard or read,” said the Princess Sophia, earnestly and even entreatingly: “because I will candidly tell you how much is true and how much is false, of all that rumour circulates or that scandal loves to repeat.”

“Yes—it is better that I should know how to discriminate between the true and false,” said the young Princess, evidently appreciating the justice of the remark.

“Heaven knows that the Royal History is already clouded enough, without the necessity of wilful exaggeration! I have heard then, my dear aunt,” she continued, partially averting her blushing countenance, “that my deceased aunt, your well-beloved sister the Princess Amelia, died heartbroken from a blighted and dishonouring love——”

“No, no—it is not true—it is not true!” exclaimed the Princess Sophia: but her very manner convinced her niece that the tale *was* indeed too true. “What else have you heard, Charlotte?” demanded the aunt abruptly.

“Dreadful things connected with my uncle Ernest, the Duke of Cumberland,” responded the young Princess hesitatingly “I overheard the other day the Hon. Mrs. Bredalbane and Lady Prescott conversing together about uncle Ernest, and his late valet Sellis——”

“Oh! but this is the vilest of scandals!” exclaimed the Princess Sophia, startling as if galvanised “Come, my dear girl—we must talk no more upon the subject—you must think no more of them——”

“I will endeavour to forget them,” rejoined the Princess Charlotte: but having taken her leave of her aunt, she continued to ponder deeply and painfully upon all these matters during her ride back to Windsor Castle.

CHAPTER CIX.

WESTMINSTER BRIDGE.

It was the Wednesday fixed for the appointment with Daniel Coffin on Westminster Bridge; and shortly after dusk the Prince Regent, muffled closely in a capacious mantle, and with a hat the slouching brims of which completely shaded his countenance, issued from the gate of Carlton Palace that opened into St. James's Park. Passing rapidly along the Mall, he at length relaxed his pace; and on arriving opposite St. James's he walked very slowly, in the evident expectation of meeting some one. The evening was dull and misty, and very few people were in the park: but presently a figure with an unmistakable gait, emerged as it were from the surrounding gloom, and accosted his Royal Highness,

“Ah! it is you,” ejaculated the Prince. “You are punctual: it is barely five o'clock.”

"Why your Royal Highness," observed the Hangman, "when I received such a pressing, and I may say a peremptory message as your valet brought me to-day, it wasn't likely I should go and neglect it."

"Well, well," interrupted the Prince: "you must talk as little and listen as patiently as you can, for I have something of the greatest importance to say to you. But before I proceed, let me tell you that if I know to reward liberally I am equally aware how to punish severely: so that your fidelity shall be nobly recompensed, but any treachery on your part shall be ruthlessly punished."

"I don't at all object to such terms," remarked Coffin: "because I am too wise not to earn the reward—and I am not such a fool as to risk the punishment."

"I like deeds and not words," said the Prince: "and if I have given you this warning it has not been without a reason. Wherefore did you go to Lady Ernestina Dysart and tell her that it was my intention to make her the bearer of the money to be paid to you this night?"

"Ah!" ejaculated the Hangman; "her ladyship told you that? But what else did she tell your Royal Highness?"

"She told me nothing," replied the Prince. "but what I presume was the truth: namely, that you insinuated yourself into Leveson House—that you found your way to her private chamber—and that you made her a monstrous proposal which I dare not name."

"And was this all Lady Ernestina told you?" inquired the Hangman, the sardonic leer which he gave being visible even in the deepening gloom of the hour.

"Was not that enough?" exclaimed the Prince, astonished at the question: "or would you have me understand that Lady Ernestina actually succumbed to your wishes?"

"No—I didn't mean anything of the sort," interrupted the Hangman, now satisfied that Ernestina had *not* mentioned to the Prince a word relative to the other incidents which had occurred on the same night at Leveson House; not that he would have cared if she had been more communicative on the subject, but he was merely curious to ascertain the point.

"There is something peculiar in your manner," said the Prince: "as if you fancied that Lady Ernestina revealed to me less than she might have done."

"Well," observed the Hangman, carelessly, "I only thought perhaps she might have told your Royal Highness that I got a few guineas out of her, and one or two

little articles of jewellery that she gave me —"

"Of that no matter," interrupted the Prince: "it is your disposition as well as your calling to lay your hand on whatever comes in your way. But to cut all this matter short, I merely mention the fact of Lady Ernestina's calling privately upon me and communicating the particulars of your visit to her, in order to show you by your own actions that you cannot always keep a secret or behave prudently."

"Well, I admit I was wrong," observed the Hangman, affecting a contrite tone: "but as your Royal Highness had so positively said you meant to employ Lady Ernestina to bring the money to me at eleven o'clock to-night on Westminster Bridge, I didn't think there was any harm in just mentioning the fact to her, and I certainly did not expect that she would peach to you again—"

"Well, once more I say," ejaculated the Prince, impetuously, "you must listen and not talk—and you must beware in future how you open your lips to breathe my name to a soul. I know your character well: money is your god—gold is your idol: and you care not what you do or what happens as long as your avarice is gratified. Is it not so?"

"Your Royal Highness isn't far wrong," answered the Hangman with a chuckle.

"I knew it," observed the Prince laconically. "And now, therefore, I am going this evening to tempt you with the quantities of gold—indeed to line your pockets so effectually with the precious metal that, if I mistake not, you will be the happiest man in existence. In the first place, I give you at once the five hundred guineas which were to have been handed over to-night at eleven o'clock —"

"Ah! then that appointment is not to be kept?" ejaculated Coffin, as he clutched the heavy bag of chinking gold which the Prince gave him as he spoke.

"Listen and interrupt me not," continued his Royal Highness. "You have the five hundred guineas which I promised you: now I wish to know whether you will earn another five hundred by performing the service I am about to specify?"

"I'd hang my own mother for such a sum, if she was alive," answered Coffin eagerly.

"Then if you would so willingly dispose of your parent," exclaimed the Prince, "you will have no objection to surrender up to the keeping of others a person who is now dwelling beneath your roof?"

"Who does your Royal Highness mean?" demanded Coffin.

"I mean the young man who passes by the name of the Foundling——"

"Ah! what, Jack? I thought from what I've lately heard that he belongs by rights to some great family. I was quite sure that Larry Sampson," continued the Hangman, "did not go up to Taggarty's to make inquiries for nothing."

"Who or what the lad is you will never know," resumed the Prince, in a firm and decisive tone. Be it sufficient for me to say that his mother is a lady who has enlisted my sympathies in her case; and I purpose to provide for the young man in a foreign country. Now, will you part with him by fair means?"

"To be sure—for the consideration named just now," answered the Hangman, readily.

"But in order to earn that other five hundred guineas," resumed the Prince "you must do certain things to carry out the view which I entertain. In the first place, you must on some pretence or excuse cause the Foundling to be in the central recess on the left hand side of Westminster Bridge this night at eleven o'clock! In a word, he must keep the precise appointment which was originally made for you: and he must be left alone in that recess for at least a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes."

"What the deuce can this be for?" exclaimed the Hangman. "I should not like any harm to befall the boy——"

"Harm—none is intended. But as circumstances compel me thus to confide in you, I have no objection to state for your security and tranquillity, that the object of the boy's being left alone in the recess of the bridge this night for a brief period, is to enable one who feels deeply interested in him to have an opportunity of gazing for once upon his countenance. Now do you understand me?"

"Perfectly—and it shall be done," replied the Hangman. "What next?"

"The moment you have left the Foundling in the recess," continued the Regent "you will hasten to the end of the bridge on the Westminster side, and there you will encounter me, I shall be dressed as you see me now; and then I will explain to you what farther is required to be done."

"But I would rather know now," said the Hangman naturally suspicious of treachery.

"Well," said the Prince, after a brief pause, "I think it may be better to explain

myself at once. When the Foundling has been a quarter of an hour in the recess of the bridge, you will have to fetch him away again and induce him to accompany you in a boat on some pretence or another as far as the receiving-ship which lies off the Tower Stairs. You will place him aboard that ship and there leave him. These are all the details of the service which I require of you, and for which the other five hundred guineas shall be placed in your hands when I meet you on the bridge to-night. And now before you utter a word in reply to my proposals, let me tell you that if you *do* undertake this night's service, you must beware of treachery! For were you to receive my gold and then keep the boy with you still, in the hope of making him the pretence and means of future exactions, I will find a way to wreak a deadly vengeance upon you. Therefore, let us understand each other well——"

"Your Royal Highness needn't fear: I will be staunch to the back-bone," exclaimed the Hangman. "Of course I don't mind as long as I know the lad is to be properly dealt with."

"He shall be amply and honourably provided for in the Colonies," rejoined the Prince. "It was at first my intention to have him taken from you without your knowledge, and to keep you in ignorance of what ultimately became of him: but on maturer reflection, I resolved—seeing that he had lived with you so long—to deal frankly and candidly with you. I have now done so: and I offer you a large—a very large reward."

"And I shan't prove ungrateful for the kindness you have shown," said the Hangman.

"As a matter of course," observed the Prince, a thought striking him, "you will not mention to the young man a single word beforehand?—you will not in any way excite his suspicion relative to the proceedings that are this night to take place with regard to him?"

"Trust me," exclaimed Coffin. "I shall know how to invent some excuse to make him stay in the recess of the bridge till I go back to fetch him again; and as for getting him in a boat down as far as the receiving-ship, that will be easy enough—for I have often taken him on queer expeditions the object of which he has never known till the time came. All that can be easily managed: the deuce of it is what am I to say afterwards to my young woman and her brother about his disappearance?"

"Say that he has run away," cried the Prince; "or been killed in some scuffle."

"Well, I suppose I shall find an excuse," observed the Hangman. "Has your Royal Highness anything more to say?"

"Nothing," was the response: "only to warn you once again to beware of perfidy, and to bid you meet me punctually at the beginning of Westminster Bridge as the clock strikes eleven—the foundling being at that hour in the recess agreed upon."

"All shall be right as the mail," responded the Hangman.

He and the Prince then separated—the latter hastening across the Mall to St. James's Palace, and the former quitting the park at an equally speedy pace.

Astonished at all he had heard—devoured with curiosity to learn who the Foundling's parents really could be—revolving in his mind a thousand schemes to penetrate this mystery and turn it to subsequent advantage—Daniel Coffin sped towards Fleet Lane: and in the absorbing pre-occupation of his thoughts he accomplished a considerable portion of the distance ere he remembered that he had enjoined Lady Ernestina to be sure and meet him that night eleven o'clock. But then he reflected that the Prince must have no doubt already told her, or would let her know during the evening, that he had changed his mind and required not her services to convey the five hundred guineas. Then, under these circumstances, would Ernestina repair to the bridge at all? The Hangman could not possibly conjecture: nor did he now choose to devote much attention to the subject. His desires in that quarter were, for the time being, all wrapped up in the more absorbing excitement of the business he had in hand and the money he had yet to earn.

Meantime the Prince Regent had entered St. James's Palace, and proceeded straight to the apartments of his sister the Princess Sophia. On obtaining an interview with her alone, he hastened to explain as much as he thought fit of what he had done in the matter now nearest her heart.

"Everything is arranged," he said, "in accordance with your desires. This night, at eleven o'clock, shall you have an opportunity of gazing for a few moments upon your son, and even of speaking to him a few words if you will. But in this case you will of course address him as a stranger: and I warn you against suffering any transitory feeling of weakness to betray you into a revelation to that youth——"

"No, no—not for the world," interrupted the Princess, "would I confess to

him the secret of his birth! I shall not trust myself to speak to him at all: I shall merely look upon him—But enough of this! What other arrangements have you made?"

"At half-past ten to-night I shall come to fetch you," resumed the Prince: "and you will have to accompany me on foot to the place where I have arranged for the youth to be at eleven. As a matter of course I have been compelled to make a confidant of that dreadful man—I will not name him—with whom the boy has been living so long. After you have seen your son, that man will take him away in a boat to the receiving-ship lying off the Tower, the lieutenant in command of which has already received private instructions how to act. A vessel now lying at Gravesend and bound for Canada, sets sail at three o'clock in the morning, by which hour there will be ample time to place the youth on board——"

"And when he arrives in Canada?" asked the Princess, impatiently.

"A good situation will be provided for him," replied the Prince, "and ample opportunity afforded for his reformation and future welfare."

"Thank you brother, for all this trouble—this forethought—this excellent arrangement," cried the Princess, the tears trickling down her cheeks: then as a sudden thought flashed to her mind, she exclaimed, "But that dreadful man of whom you have made a confidant——"

"I shall take good care of him also," answered the Prince, with a look of sinister meaning.

He then took a temporary leave of his royal sister, promising to return again at half-past ten o'clock: and in the meantime he went back to Carlton House to indulge in a luxurious banquet and a copious flow of wine. But in the middle of the festivity he received a whispered intimation from his faithful valet Germain that Lady Ernestina Dysart had called to see him upon most urgent business. Apologising therefore to his guests at the dinner-table for leaving them for a few minutes, the Prince repaired to the apartment to which Lady Ernestina had been shown.

"Pardon me for thus intruding upon you, at such an hour," said her ladyship, raising the dark veil which had covered her features: "but you remember when I saw you the other day that you were to communicate with me again—and I was fearful you might have forgotten that *this* is the night——"

"No—I had not forgotten it," interrupted the Prince, taking the lady's hand and pressing it warmly. "But the truth is, my dear Ernestina, I have made some other arrangements. Indeed, on maturer reflection, I could not think of allowing you to perform so ignominious a part as to meet that ruffian for the purpose of giving him the money——"

"Ah!" ejaculated Ernestina: "then I presume you have entrusted some other messenger with the requisite amount? You are sure you have not neglected it?"

"Not for the world!" cried the Prince, anxious to get back to the dinner-table. "Everything is arranged: and you have nothing to fear."

"A thousand thanks for this assurance!" exclaimed Ernestina. "And now farewell: I will not keep you another moment away from your guests."

The Prince pressed his lips to Ernestina's and they separated—his Royal Highness returning to the banquet which he had quitted so reluctantly, and his frail friend issuing forth again from Carlton House. But as with her veil closely drawn down, she retraced her steps to Albemarle Street, Ernestina said to herself, "It is all right! My mortal enemy will be *there*—and opportunity will consequently still serve the resolve I have taken. 'Tis for *me* to anticipate the messenger whom the Prince will send with the money! Yes—the path is clear enough. One bold deed—one energetic act—one tremendous crime—and I am safe! But, Ah! better even that crime than live in constant terror of this dreadful man! And after all, it can be no crime to rid oneself of a mortal enemy: it is merely striking a blow in self-defence!"

Such were Ernestina's dreadful musings, as she hurriedly retraced her way to Leveson House.

At half past ten o'clock the Prince Regent, once more muffled up in his ample cloak and wearing the hat with the slouched brims, issued forth from Carlton House, entered St. James's Palace, and repaired to the apartments of the Princess Sophia. Almost immediately afterwards, he came forth again, accompanied by his sister, who was likewise enveloped in a capacious mantle besides wearing a thick veil attached to her bonnet. Clinging to her brother's arm, she sped nervously on by his side, her heart beating audibly and painfully. Little was spoken between them as they traversed the park in the most cautious manner with a view to avoid observation: but on this score they were

comparatively safe—for the night was tempestuous, the wind had risen, the rain was falling, and few people were abroad. Even the occasional stragglers whom they met, when emerging into Great George Street, and afterwards in Bridge Street, little suspected that the gentleman and lady whom they thus passed and who were muffled up in those ample cloaks, were the Prince Regent and his royal sister!

When within about a dozen yards of the beginning of the bridge, the Prince said in a hurried voice, "You must not cross to the other side of the street—and keep your eyes fixed upon me. The lamp-light is strong enough for that purpose. Watch until you see a man join me: then if I keep him in conversation, you may rest assured that it is the ruffian Coffin. In this case lose no time in hastening on to the recess which I have already explained to you, and where no doubt the youth will be seated. Fortunate is it for our enterprise that the night is so inclement; there are evidently but very few persons abroad, and the bridge seems comparatively deserted.

While making this last observation, the Prince's straining eyes followed the curvature of the bridge as it was traced by the double row of lamps; and few indeed were the passenger-forms that darkened the spaces of light produced by those lamps which were suspended over the massive stone recesses that have only within the last few years been removed from the bridge. In compliance with her brother's suggestions, the Princess Sophia quitted his arm—crossed the street—and from the opposite side attentively watched his movements. Eleven o'clock was proclaimed by the iron tongue of time sounding from Westminster Abbey; and while the metallic din of the last stroke was yet vibrating in the gasty night-wind, a man enveloped in coarse rough garments stepped up to the Prince.

"I'm Daniel Coffin," he said.

"All right!" responded his Royal Highness. "Is the lad there?"

"He is—and deucedly puzzled, too, to know what it can be all about?"

"No matter, as long as he is there. You will have the kindness to remain here with me for a few minutes."

"To be sure," rejoined the Hangman. Devilish good dodge on your part to prevent me going to see what sort of a lady it is that means to peep into the recess! But I don't mean to play your Royal Highness such a dirty trick——"

"Hush! address me not by name!" whispered the Prince, impatiently: then as he cast a look across the way, he beheld his sister hurrying on towards the recess!" Here—come a little farther into the shade and take this bag. You found the contents of the other to be all right?"

"Nothing could be more accurate," answered Daniel Coffin, as he clutched this second bag which the Prince placed in his hand.

We must now digress for a few moments to state that just before the Prince Regent and his royal sister made their appearance in Bridge Street, Lady Ernestina Dysart had passed rapidly that way and had at once entered upon the bridge. She was now clad in her widow's weeds but wore a garb evidently assumed for the purpose of disguise; and while one hand kept down the folds of a dark thick veil over her features, the other firmly clutched a naked dagger beneath her cloak. Could any human glance have penetrated through that veil, it would have seen her countenance ghastly pale, and her ashy white lips compressed with the stern resolve that swayed her soul and was reflected in the fixed look of her eloquent eyes. Her pace was rapid but determined: there was not the least irresolution in her mien, her gait, nor in her heart.

Continuing her way over the bridge, she flung a quick searching look into the middle recess on the left hand side as she passed it by; but no one was there. She accordingly proceeded onward until she reached the extremity of the bridge on the Lambeth side: and there, just as she was about to turn back, she caught a sudden glimpse of the unmistakable features of the Hangman as he looked up for a moment and the light of the lamp fell upon his countenance. Ernestina did not give a second glance: that one was sufficient—and as she thus acquired the sudden certainty that her mortal enemy was upon the bridge, a flame appeared to diffuse itself throughout her entire being. Instead of turning back at the instant, she walked a few yards farther on—saying to herself "I will allow him time to reach the recess ere I retrace my way."

By not flinging a second glance upon the Hangman, but remaining satisfied with the one which had showed her he was there, she did not notice that some one accompanied him. With the fires of anticipated vengeance coursing through her veins, and clutching her dagger still more firmly than even at first, she turned back—retraced her steps—and just as she reached the middle

recess, again caught sight of the Hangman who was standing on the foot-way as if waiting for some one. But a passenger was advancing behind Ernestina at the moment—and therefore she herself passed rapidly on. In a minute however she stopped and allowed the individual to pass her by. Another person was now also coming from behind; and without looking towards him, she also allowed him to pass. Then suddenly turning back, just as the Abbey clock began to strike eleven, she hastened to the recess.

At that moment a strong gust of wind swept over the bridge, making the flames flicker in the lamps in such a way that it seemed as if about to extinguish them. But by the uncertain glimmering Ernestina beheld the form of a man seated in the recess: and gliding in rapid as a ghost, she raised the dagger and drove it deep down into that individual's breast.

The attack was so sudden and as a matter of course so unexpected, that Jack the Founding—for he indeed the victim was—no sooner caught a glimpse of the weapon flashing before his eyes in the lamp-light, than he was overpowered by the blow. A faint cry came from his lips as he fell back in the recess: but a louder and still more agonizing ejaculation burst from the tongue of the wretched Ernestina as the glimpse which she caught of the countenance suddenly upturned in mortal agony, showed her that it was *not* the Hangman whom she had thus stricken, but a youth whom she had never seen before!

Those cries—that of the young man and that of the assassin-lady—were drowned in the gust which was sweeping over the bridge; but suddenly seized with a frenzied horror, Ernestina fled precipitately, leaving the dagger sticking in the breast of the unfortunate youth. Alas! had she used a little more caution, this frightful misadventure would not have occurred: for she would perhaps have seen that the second individual whom she stopped to let pass, just before she flew back to the recess to deal the blow, was the very man for whom that blow was really intended!

We must now return to the Princess Sophia, whom we left watching at the commencement of the bridge. She saw through the gloom of night the dark form of a man accost her brother on the opposite side of the way: she lingered for a few moments to mark whether they remained together: and observing that they did so, she of course felt convinced that it was the Public Executioner. She therefore hastened along the bridge; and as she

drew near the recess where she was to behold her son, such indescribable feelings seized upon her that she felt as if she had not courage to proceed, but must turn back abruptly! The next moment, however, she blamed herself for yielding to such sensations: and then, by a sudden revulsion of the heart's inscrutable emotions, she was seized with a fervid longing to gratify her curiosity and behold the offspring of her illicit love.

Inspired, therefore, with all the warmth of these maternal feelings—impelled by the parental yearnings that thus suddenly asserted their empire over her heart—the Princess Sophia sped onward and gained the recess. At that moment the wind was lulled—the lamp was burning steadily overhead—and its light was thrown full into the recess.

Heavens! what an appalling spectacle met the eyes of the Princess!—for *there*, within that nook of masonry—instead of her living son, whose animated countenance she expected to behold—a youth lay stretched upon the stone seat, his face ghastly and his eyes fixed like those of a corpse, and a dagger sticking deep in his breast!

A wild cry swept along the bridge—a cry which no gushing wind at that moment absorbed or drowned,—but a cry whose rending anguish thrilled to each extremity, rebounding from bank to bank and reaching the ears of the Prince Regent and the public Executioner.

CHAPTER CX.

THE YOUNG PRINCESS

On the same evening and at about the same hour that the preceding scene took place on Westminster Bridge, the Princess Charlotte was passing through an ordeal of considerable mental excitement at Windsor Castle.

Retiring soon after ten o'clock to her own chamber, she dismissed her attendant ladies and sate down to pen a long letter to her mother. For it will be remembered that the Princess Sophia had, on the previous day, undertaken to write to Jocelyn Loftus and beseech him to pay an immediate visit to London, that she might hold a consultation with him relative to the conspiracy then on foot against the Princess of Wales. Now the Young Princess Charlotte hoped, with the sanguine fervour that was natural to her age, not

only that her aunt's letter would find Jocelyn at Canterbury, but that he would pay immediate attention to it by hurrying up to London, and that he would thence set off to Italy to warn the persecuted Princess Caroline of her danger. In this case Jocelyn might become the bearer of a letter, from the young Princess Charlotte to her injured mother—not a mere letter which she would be compelled to write guardedly and in such a manner as to exempt it from the chance of suppression, but a letter wherein she might give free vent to all the filial fondness that she experienced towards the being who gave her birth.

The composition of this letter occupied the Princess upwards of an hour; and as she laid down her pen the time-piece on the mantel chimed eleven. The night was tempestuous: gusts of wind swept round the old towers of the palatial castle; and the rain was from time to time driven forcibly against the window-panes. The young Princess glanced round the spacious bed-chamber in which she was seated: and as the thought slowly crept into her mind that many and many a horror—many a cruel deed—and many an atrocity had been perpetrated within the walls of Windsor Castle, she wondered whether that particular room had ever been the scene of bloodshed. As this idea stole into her brain, she shuddered with a deep involuntary tremor; and again did her glance sweep rapidly around the apartment. But although it was furnished in the most sumptuous manner,—with gorgeous draperies drawn over the windows—golden-fringed hangings surrounding the gilt couch—the walls papered with a cheerful pattern and adorned with several splendid paintings—the cornices all elaborately carved and edged with gilding—the mantel piece covered with ornaments—the magnificent mirrors reflecting the light of several waxtapers, and thus enhancing the lustre that flooded the room with its yellow glow—the toilet-table, the cheffoniers and the chest of drawers all covered with elegant trifles and brilliant nick-nacks,—in a word, although nothing could exceed the gay and gorgeous aspect of that apartment, yet did it this night seem in the eyes of the Princess to be even more sombre and gloomy than any old tapestried chamber, filled with mouldering furniture and moth-eaten hangings, in the haunted castle of romance.

The truth is, the mind of the young Princess was in that morbid state which made her view everything in a melancholy

light—or rather, through the ominous cloud that thus hung upon her soul. She was unhappy; for many, many reasons was she unhappy—not only on account of her mother, but because she felt that she belonged to a family almost every member of which was steeped to the lips in vices, immoralities, and treacheries if not stained with downright crime. It seemed to her, then, as if she were sprung from a doomed race—a race whose infamies had rendered it accursed in the sight of heaven, and whose punishment had to some extent—in the person of the lunatic King—commenced upon earth. No wonder that her mind became attenuated as thus she pondered, or that it should have thus been imbued with superstitious tendencies, so that when she looked around that sumptuously-furnished room, she beheld not the superb draperies and the brilliant ornaments, but fancied that there was blood upon the walls, and that the stains of murder met her looks on every side!

Naturally of a strong and decisive character, the young Princess endeavoured to cast off this superstitious feeling which was gaining upon her. But she could not. Recent experience, together with the dark mysterious hints that in various ways and at different times met her ears, had made her aware that the Royal personages of the present age were fully capable of abhorrent perfidies, base conspiracies, and most probably of flagrant crimes; and if such were the case at the beginning of the nineteenth century and in an age of civilization, of what horrors and of what atrocities might former royal families have been guilty, in earlier periods and in darker times? Oh! had not the walls of Windsor Castle been witnesses of scenes whereof memory remained and no record was kept, save in the eternal registers of heaven's chancery?—and was it not probable that every room, every chamber, every nook, and every corner of that castellated abode of England's Kings had been the theatre of some remorseless deed or foul midnight murder?

These were the ideas that came trooping through the brain of the Princess, producing upon her the same effect as if a procession of shrouded spectres passed before her views; and unable to endure the awful nature of her thoughts, she rose from her seat and advanced towards the fire-place. But as her eyes fell upon the mirror above the mantel, it struck her that some horrible countenance was looking over her shoulder. A shriek rose to her very lips as she turned abruptly round with a strong recoil; but the scream died

instantaneously away ere it found vent—for there was naught near her—nothing palpable to alarm her; and she saw that she was the prey of a fevered fancy. Terror however parched her tongue and made her throat feel as dry as if she had swallowed ashes; and advancing towards a table, she filled a glass with water and conveyed it to her lips. But at that moment a gust of wind swept with such violence against the window that the casement rattled as if some intruder were trying to force an entry: and the splendid draperies waved backward and forward with the draught as if some one were concealed behind and purposely shaking them.

The fears of the Princess now arose to an intolerable height: and unable any longer to endure the solitude of her chamber, she was about to ring the bell to summon her ladies-in-waiting. But she suddenly recollected that as she had dismissed them for the night, they had separated to their own apartments, and that if they were recalled she would have to explain the reason for thus summoning them back to her presence; and her natural pride revolted from the idea of confessing that she was afraid to be left alone during so tempestuous a night. She accordingly endeavoured to conquer her fears. But she could not. There seemed to be a spell upon her mind—a mysterious gloom which she could not shake off. It was like an ominous foreboding—vague and unknown—but not the less oppressive and painful. Suddenly she bethought herself that the Hon. Mr. Bredalbane's chamber was close at hand, and that this lady having been somewhat indisposed had kept her room all day. It therefore occurred to the young Princess that she might repair to Mrs. Bredalbane's apartment for the ostensible reason of inquiring after her, but in reality for the sake of companionship,—her Royal Highness hoping that half-an-hour's friendly discourse with this lady, whom she liked much, would perhaps cheer her mind, or at all events efface these superstitious terrors which at present forebade her from seeking her couch.

We may here observe that the Hon. Mrs. Bredalbane was one of the Bedchamber Woman attached to the Queen's household. She was a widow—about forty years of age—very affable and kind-hearted—but given to scandal and amazingly fond of gossiping. Her lodging at the Castle was at the end of the same passage from which the Princess Charlotte's own suite of apartments opened, and which indeed

communicated with the rooms of several of the Court ladies.

Issuing forth from her chamber, the young Princess threaded the passage, which was lighted with lamps suspended to the ceiling; and she reached the extremity of the carpetted corridor without encountering a soul. The door which she now gently opened led into a little antechamber beyond which was Mrs. Bredalbane's own room; and as the Princess approached the door of the latter, she heard voices speaking within. Suddenly reminded that she would perhaps be intruding, she was about to retire at once, when a word—a name—which suddenly smote her ear, transfixed her to the spot and all in a moment inspired her with the keenest curiosity and the acutest interest.

That name was *Sellis*!

There were candles burning upon the table in the antechamber. A velvet curtain hung in the doorway between the two rooms; and the door itself was now ajar. The reader may therefore understand how it was that the presence of the Prince was not observed by those who were in the bed-chamber, and how she was thus enabled to become an unseen listener to the conversation that was going on and in which her interests had been excited in so sudden and so lively a manner. The voice which she had heard mention the name of *Sellis* was that of the Hon. Mrs. Bredalbane; and she speedily discovered that the friend with whom Mrs. Bredalbane was thus familiarly conversing was Lady Prescott—also one of the royal Bedchamber Women. On a former occasion, the Princess Charlotte had heard these two ladies in confidential discourse together; and her ears had then caught enough to make her long to know more. Now therefore that the opportunity so unexpectedly but so favourably presented itself, she could not resist the temptation. Forgetting all her recent terrors, and too much swayed by intense curiosity to reflect for a moment that she was acting wrong thus to play the eaves-dropper, the young Princess was so completely transfixed at the mention of the name of *Sellis*, that she could not possibly avoid remaining where she has thus suddenly stopped short; and losing sight of every other subject that a moment before had been uppermost in her mind, she gave all her attention to the discourse that was taking place in the chamber.

"You seem, my dear Mrs. Bredalbane," said Lady Prescott, "to be somewhat bitter against the Duke of Cumberland. Surely

you have imbibed no unjust prejudice towards that Prince?"

"Prejudice, my dear friend!" exclaimed Mrs. Bredalbane. "I am really surprised that you should deem me capable of such a failing. It is perfectly true that I do not like the duke, and that he never was any favourite of mine; but although I may have my aversions and my antipathies, I should scorn to invent any evil reports, or exaggerate those already in circulation, to serve a vindictive purpose."

"Oh! I know you too well," cried Lady Prescott, "to need such assurances from your lips; and if I spoke of prejudice, I was assuredly wrong. I am aware, my dear friend, that you are better acquainted than any other lady of the Court with the secrets and mysteries of the Family——"

"Yes," observed Mrs. Bredalbane, in a sort of musing tone: "I could tell some strange tales if I chose. But there are certain things with which I am acquainted, and which will never pass my lips."

"When I asked you just now," said Lady Prescott, "to give me all the details relative to the affair of *Sellis* and the Duke of Cumberland, I did not wish to introduce upon any secret or special knowledge that you may possess concerning that lamentable tragedy. I merely thought that as I was not in London at the time but buried in that Welsh solitude to which Sir John Prescott took me for my health—as you must remember——"

"Yes—I recollect that you were absent at the time: and when I sent you the newspapers containing the proceedings, I remember," continued Mrs. Bredalbane, "that your husband wrote to beg I would desist from forwarding the journals, as you were in such a nervous state through ill-health that any excitement was most prejudicial."

"And therefore, you perceive, my dear friend," said Lady Prescott, "that I am ignorant of most of the details connected with that dreadful affair. When I returned to Court after my Welsh rustication, the death of the Princess Amelia had become the all-absorbing topic of mournful interest; and no one ever breathed a word relative to the *Sellis* tragedy. It had therefore well-nigh fled from my memory until you so singularly and pointedly alluded to it the other day. I then asked you to give me the full narrative: and you were about to comply with my request, when something interrupted the discourse——"

"I recollect," said Mrs. Bredalbane: "It was during the card-party the other

night, and I thought that as we were seated in the window-recess, the Princess Charlotte was listening to what we said. That is the reason I broke of the topic so suddenly."

"And now therefore," continued Lady Prescott, "that we are all alone together, and free from interruption—indeed without a chance of anybody intruding upon us—I hope you will gratify my curiosity."

"I have no objection," replied Mrs. Bredalbane: then, after a pause, she commenced her narrative in a low and measured tone, as if she were not only impressed with the solemn seriousness of the subject, but also afraid that the very walls themselves had ears.

CHAPTER CXI.

THE SELLIS TRAGEDY.

"You are aware that the Duke of Cumberland, at the time of which I am about to speak, occupied the same suite of apartments where he now resides, in the Kitchen Court of St. James's Palace. You will also recollect that it was upwards of four years ago, in the summer of 1810, when the fearful tragedy occurred. At that time the three principal valets of his Royal Highness the Duke of Cumberland were Sellis, Neals, and Joux; and they took turns, week by week, in doing duty. Joseph Sellis was an Italian—short in stature but well-made, with an olive complexion, and tolerably good looking. He was married, and had four children. His habits were exceedingly domesticated and regular: he was a good, steady man—a kind husband and an excellent father. Indeed he was perfectly uxorious in his attention towards his wife, who was a somewhat handsome woman: and so fond was he of his children that if either of them experienced the slightest ailment, he became overwhelmed with grief and a prey to the most excruciating apprehensions. His wife was an exemplary woman: and altogether it would be impossible to conceive a happier family than that of Sellis. In disposition he was mild, inoffensive, and obliging: thoroughly humane, he seemed incapable of harming a soul—but, on the contrary, was ever ready to perform a generous deed or render a service. In fact he was liked not only by the Duke of Cumberland, but by the Royal Family in general, all the Princes and Princesses noticing him and expressing a

constant interest in his welfare. They, moreover, made him numerous presents, and never seemed wearied of heaping favours upon him. To such an extent was he thus esteemed, or indeed caressed, by Royalty, that the Duke and one of his sisters—the Princess Augusta it was—stood sponsors for Sellis's youngest child. Moreover, though all the servants of the Duke's household were on board wages, and the valets were not regularly lodged in St. James's—the one on duty for the week alone being expected to sleep there as a general rule—Sellis and his family were nevertheless accommodated with rooms over the gateway leading into the Kitchen Court from Cleveland Row. These rooms communicated by means of a passage with the Duke's suite of apartments; and sometimes the Princesses, when on a visit to their brother's rooms would pass into Sellis's lodgings and fondle his children. In addition to his wages, which were handsome, he had various perquisites such as were enjoyed by no other dependant in the Duke's household;—and thus in every way was Sellis a favourite, and all circumstances combined to render him a happy man."

"And was he perfectly sane," inquired Lady Prescott.—"in the full and complete enjoyment of his reason?"

"Undoubtedly," exclaimed Mrs. Bredalbane. "Quiet but cheerful—unobtrusive in manner, though of a gay disposition—and so temperate that he never tasted spirits, disliked wine, and habitually drank water—Sellis was never a prey to any unnatural excitement. In fact, he was just one of those persons who seem fitted by nature to pass tranquilly and serenely through life, experiencing as little of its agitation and turmoil as can possibly fall to the lot of mortals. Thrifty and economical, abstemious and regular in his mode of life, he was not only free from pecuniary embarrassment, but had accumulated some little savings from his wages, which the presents he had received from the Royal Family had materially increased."

"Then he was altogether a good and excellent man?" said Lady Prescott.

"An excellent man!" cried Mrs. Bredalbane with marked emphasis. "But having now concluded my prefatory remarks, I shall enter upon the recital of that most dread tragedy which has made the name of Sellis known throughout the world. It was, then, in the forenoon of the 31st of May, 1810, that Sellis was walking with his wife in St. James's Park,

His mood was gay and cheerful as usual : and the discourse chiefly turned upon the preparations which he wished his wife to make for a little party that he proposed to give in the course of the ensuing week to celebrate the birth-day of one of his children. Mrs. Sellis promised compliance with all her husband's suggestions ; and at two o'clock they re-entered their lodgings. Dinner was served up : and Sellis ate with his usual appetite. But scarcely was the meal over when one of the children was taken ill with indigestion. The surgeon was sent for : and although there was no positive danger, yet such was the anxiety of Sellis that he requested his wife to let the child remain with her that night, observing that he would sleep in his own room in the Duke's suite of apartments. Mrs. Sellis consented ; and in the evening—between six and seven o'clock—Sellis repaired to the room alluded to, to see that it was in proper order for him to pass the night there : because I should observe, it was not Sellis's week for being on duty about the person of his royal master—it was Neale's turn—and thus Sellis was not supposed to be occupying his room in the ducal apartments, but to be sleeping (as was his wont when off duty) in his own lodgings. I may further add that the chamber of which I am speaking, and which must be called *Sellis's room*, was at the end of a passage communicating with the Duke's private apartment, and that adjoining this apartment—indeed, separated from it by only a thin partition of wainscot—was *Neale's room*. Be kind enough to keep these particulars in your memory—”

“I shall not lose sight of them,” observed Lady Prescott, “Pray proceed my dear friend—I am dying with curiosity—”

“I am now approaching the blood-stained chapter of this narrative,” said Mrs. Bredalbane. “It appears that Sellis having assured himself that his room was in order, and that the house-maid had not omitted to set it to rights since he last slept there, was about to return to his wife, when he bethought himself of something that he wished to say to Neale. He accordingly repaired to Neale's room ; and with the familiarity usually subsisting between the fellow-members of the same household, he opened the door without knocking. But suddenly starting back in dismay, he exclaimed, ‘*Heavens ! the Princess Augusta !*’ and fled along the passage. But in his precipitate flight, he ran against Joux—the Duke's third valet—who was advancing up the passage at the moment, and who had heard that

ejaculation which burst from his lips. On observing Joux, Sellis instantaneously endeavoured to assume an air of composure ; and he began to apologise for his awkwardness in running against him. But Joux saw plainly enough that something had transpired not only to disconcert his fellow-page but to agitate him profoundly. Nevertheless, as Sellis did not volunteer any explanation—but, on the contrary, sought to veil his excited feeling as much as possible—Joux did not think it right to question him upon the subject. In the midst of the apologies that Sellis was making for his awkwardness, he suddenly broke off to inquire whither Joux was going.—“*To speak to Neale,*” was the response. “*No : you cannot see him ; he is engaged*,” exclaimed Sellis, with a strange wildness of look and a most unaccountable abruptness of tone. “*Come along with me :*” and clutching Joux by the arm, he led him into his lodgings. There he became more composed—or else put on a forced composure : and taking wine and brandy from the cupboard, he invited Joux to help himself. The invalid child was asleep at the time ; and Mrs. Sellis joined her husband and Joux in the parlour. Sellis mixed her a little brandy-and-water : Joux took some liquor also ; but Sellis himself abstained entirely, as was his habit. Joux remained there for about an hour, during which interval Sellis seemed to recover his wonted cheerfulness and self-possession—or if not, he at all events concealed his emotions so successfully that his wife failed to observe anything peculiar about him, beyond the anxiety which he expressed on account of his child. Presently the surgeon returned, and pronounced the little invalid to be better, assuring Sellis that there was not the slightest danger. Joux then took his departure, wondering what could possibly have been the cause of that extraordinary excitement which he had witnessed, and of that singular ejaculation which had burst from the lips of Sellis, when rushing so precipitately along the passage. It was now past eight o'clock in the evening ; and Sellis remained with his wife until ten. During this interval he was engaged in reading ; and Mrs. Sellis did not observe anything peculiar in his manner. Embracing her and the children with his wonted affection and observing that he should be up early to ascertain how the invalid little one had passed the night, he withdrew to his own room.”

“And this was at ten on the memorable night?” said Lady Prescott, inquiringly.

"Yes," responded Mrs. Bredalbane. "The Duke of Cumberland, who had gone to a concert, returned soon after midnight and retired to his own apartment, where Neale was in attendance. Then all was quiet in the palace for a couple of hours. But at about half-past two o'clock in the morning the half-porter was alarmed by a cry of '*Murder*' and starting up, he beheld the Duke of Cumberland in his night-shirt which was covered with blood. Neale was with him—and Mrs. Neale, who slept by herself in another part of the premises, was instantaneously fetched. The alarm spread through the palace—and while one footman ran to summon the Duke's medical attendants, another went to call in the guard. The Duke, leaning upon Neale's arm, returned to his apartment, whither Joux, who had been roused by the alarm, speedily repaired. An inquiry was then made for Sellis. '*Go and tell him that his Royal Highness has been well nigh murdered,*' said Neale.—Joux accordingly sped along the passage towards Sellis's room, and on his way he was joined by Mrs. Neale and the porter. On opening the door, an appalling spectacle presented itself to their view. Sellis was lying dead upon the couch, his throat cut in so horrible a manner that his head was nearly severed from his body. A razor, covered with blood, was lying upon the floor. The body was completely dressed, save and except the cravat, coat, and shoes: it seemed as if the unfortunate man had thrown himself on the bed as one does when over-exhausted or else when not feeling any inclination to retire to rest altogether, and that sleep had stolen upon him—that sleep whence he was never to awake! The wash-basin was half full of water stained with blood; and on the edge of the basin were the marks of bloody fingers plainly visible. The cravat was upon the toilette-table—the coat folded up and placed on a chair: the deceased's watch was in the pocket at the bed's head. That Sellis had been murdered, was the conviction which instantaneously struck Joux: the first glance which he threw upon the appalling scene, showed him that this was no case of suicide but a foul assassination!"

"Heavens!" ejaculated Lady Prescott, in a tone of horror. "Poor creature!—unfortunate man!"

"I must now observe," resumed Mrs. Bredalbane, "that the hall-porter and Mrs. Neale did not advance into the room at all, but the former remained for a few moments transfixed with horror upon the

threshold, while the latter fled to raise the alarm that Sellis had committed suicide! Such was no doubt the impression made at the instant upon the woman's mind. The hall-porter, on regaining his self-possession, hurried away likewise to spread the same rumour: and Joux was left alone in the room where the frightful tragedy had taken place. Advancing nearer towards the couch, he observed a sheet of paper lying upon the floor. He picked it up: it was a half-finished letter in the handwriting of Sellis—and as Joux hastily ran his eyes over the first few lines, a tremendous secret was suddenly revealed to him. He understood it all! The excitement of Sellis and the ejaculation which had burst from his lips in the passage—yes, even this murder itself—all was explained! But footsteps were approaching: and Joux thrust the letter into his pocket. The next moment a serjeant and file of men, who had been fetched from the guard-house, made their appearance at the room door. The serjeant's name was Creighton; and entering the chamber of death, he gazed in horror upon the scene. As he turned away, he observed the razor upon the floor, and picking it up, placed it upon the table. He then went out, followed by Joux; and the room was locked up. The guard retired—and Joux, hastening to the Duke's room, found that Sir Henry Halford and Mr. Home, the eminent medical practitioners had arrived and were dressing his Royal Highness's wounds, which they pronounced to be severe, but most mortal. Joux heard the accounts which the Duke gave of the affair, and then hastened to shut himself up in his own room, to read the letter of which he had as yet only caught a glimpse of the few first lines. What his feelings were *while* perusing that letter—what his reflections were *after* he had read it—I shall not pause to explain: you shall have an opportunity of judging presently, when I show you the letter itself!"

"The letter itself!" cried Lady Prescott, with a perfect thrill of astonishment in her accents.

"Yes—the letter itself," repeated Mrs. Bredalbane, in a positive tone. "You are not perhaps aware that Joux entered my service soon after the tragedy, and remained with me for upwards of a year. He told me everything—he gave me the letter——But I am anticipating——"

"Yes—pray proceed in due course, my dear friend," said Lady Prescott: "although I am on the tenter-hooks of curiosity."

"You may conceive," resumed the Hon. Mrs. Bredalbane, "the amazement, the horror and the consternation which seized upon the startled metropolis, when the morning papers of June 1st, announced that *'the Duke of Cumberland had been surprised while asleep by an attempted assassination made by one of his valets named Sellis, and who had put a period to his own existence.'* A thousand rumours were instantaneously in circulation: and in many quarters the story of the suicide was utterly disbelieved—the valet was declared to have been murdered, and the darkest hints were thrown out. A jury was summoned in the afternoon of the 1st of June, to investigate the matter. But you may conceive the astonishment of the jury, when the coroner began by informing them *'that a long examination of the principal witnesses had already been gone into, and that of course it would only now be necessary to have the depositions then taken read before them (the jury) to the witnesses!'** All the depositions which had been previously and privately taken, were therefore now read. The first was that of the Duke of Cumberland. His Royal Highness deposed that he was awakened from a profound sleep by the sensation of some blows being dealt upon his forehead; and at first he thought there was a bat in the room flying over his head. But by the light of the wax-taper he beheld the form of a man: and springing from his couch, he grappled with him, wrenching away the sword which had been the weapon of attack. He then saw the assassin escape, but without perceiving who he was; and raising his voice he summoned Neale, who slept in the adjoining room. Neal instantaneously hurried to his royal master; and then they went to the hall together to give the alarm in the manner I have already described. On returning to the Duke's chamber, they instituted a search in a closet opening therefrom; and in that closet they found a pair of Sellis's slippers. From this circumstance it was inferred that Sellis was the assassin—that he had concealed himself in the closet previously to the Duke retiring for the night—and that failing in his attempt at murder, he had fled to his own room and committed suicide. Neale's deposition confirmed that of the Duke in every detail; and Neale gratuitously added his opinion that Sellis was a morose, bad tempered, discontented person. I will here observe that every other person belonging

to the ducal household who was examined, deposed to the very reverse in respect to Sellis's character and disposition, and described him as civil, inoffensive, kind-hearted, and good-tempered. The weapon with which the Duke had been attacked was his own regimental sword, which had been left lying about in his room for some days. The walls between his Royal Highness's chamber and the hall were covered with blood-stains, caused by the Duke's hands when he went to alarm the porter. The medical evidence proved that his Royal Highness's wounds were most severe—that one of his fingers was nearly severed—and that his head was so much hurt that the arteries of the brain were laid bare. Having listened to the reading of the principal depositions the jury went to view the corpse of Sellis. The room had been left just as it was when the tragedy was first discovered. The newspapers described the body as *'lying on a bed of matted blood livid and loathsome, with a horrid gash from ear to ear: and over all the features the distortion of pain was visible, apparently struggling with the ghastly composure of death.'** The back of the head lay against the deceased's watch: and the basin, with the blood-dyed water and the finger-marks, was still there. On returning to the room where the inquest was held, the jury heard the evidence of the surgeons who had examined the corpse. They deposed that the wind-pipe was cut completely through, and that the wound was six inches in length and an inch and a half in diameter. The unhappy widow of the deceased deposed to the effect that her husband was steady, abstemious, and affectionate to herself and children—that he was in no pecuniary embarrassment—and that he had never shown the slightest symptom of mental aberration. The jury returned a verdict of *Felo de se*: the corpse was put into a hearse at dead of night, and hurried to Scotland Yard, when it was buried in a hole with a stake driven through it. Thus terminated this melancholy affair, so far as the public is acquainted with the particulars; and of course Sellis has been branded as a cowardly assassin—a midnight murderer—a miserable suicide——"

"But Joux—the French valet?" exclaimed Lady Prescott, "wherefore was he not examined at the inquest?—and why was not the letter produced?"

"Ah! those are the particulars of which I am now going to enter," observed the

* These words are quoted from the *Times'* report of the Inquest, June 2nd, 1810.

* *Times*, June 2nd, 1810.

Hon. Mrs. Bredalbane. The epistle—the half-finished epistle, penned by poor Sellis—is in that writing desk; and I will show it to you. First however, let me explain——”

But at this moment an ejaculation of mingled amazement and terror struck upon the startled ears of Mrs. Bredalbane and Lady Prescott.

CHAPTER CXII.

THE QUEEN.

THE reader will be kind enough to remember that while Mrs. Bredalbane was reciting her narrative of awful interest to Lady Prescott, the Princess Charlotte was enchained, a spell-bound listener, in the antechamber. But at the moment when Mrs. Bredalbane seemed about to enter upon the most thrilling portion of her history, the outer door of that antechamber opened suddenly; and the Princess Charlotte, turning abruptly round gave vent to an ejaculation of mingled amazement and alarm on beholding the prim starch figure of the Queen.

This was the ejaculation that reached the ears of the Hon. Mrs. Bredalbane and Lady Prescott; and springing from their seats by the cheerful fire that was blazing in the inner room, they rushed to the doorway—flung aside the curtain—and, to their indescribable wonderment, beheld the Princess Charlotte on one side of the antechamber and her Majesty the Queen on the other. Instantaneously struck with the conviction that their conversation had been overheard by one or the other of the royal ladies, if not by both, Mrs. Bredalbane and Lady Prescott exchanged looks of uneasiness and vexation.

“What are you doing here, at this time of night?” demanded the Queen bending a harsh and severe look upon the young Princess.

“I—I—came—that is,” stammered the youthful Charlotte, utterly at a loss what response to give or what excuse to make; “I came to—to——”

“Methinks, to say the least of it,” said the Queen, bridling up, “it is particularly indiscreet for a young Princess—the daughter of England’s Regent—the grand-daughter of England’s crowned Sovereigns—to be thus absent from her own apartment at midnight.”

“Madam,” exclaimed the young Princess, the haughty blood flushing her cheeks

and turning the marble of her brow into glowing crimson: “be pleased to recollect the motto upon the royal arms and apply it to yourself: *Evil be to him (or her) who evil thinks.*”

“Grand-daughter, this is an impertinence on your part,” said the Queen, darting the savage glance of a tiger-cat upon the Princess: then in a colder tone she observed, but still with sneering accents, “I must however admit the justice of hearing your defence before I condemn. Therefore, perhaps you will have the kindness to explain wherefore you are here, listening so attentively as you were like any eaves-dropper, at the moment I entered the chamber.”

“Ah! madam, you are determined to humiliate me!” exclaimed the Princess, bursting into tears: for this was the first time she had ever been so harshly and cruelly treated by the Queen.

As for Mrs. Bredalbane and Lady Prescott—they instantaneously comprehended from her Majesty’s words that the young Princess had been listening to their discourse; and well knowing that if she were to repeat to the Queen all that had been said, they would receive a prompt command to quit the Castle, bag and baggage, they threw earnestly imploring looks upon her Royal Highness. The Princess, at once catching the meaning of those glances and penetrating the ladies’ fears, suddenly wiped her eyes and flung a look of reassurance upon them. Then, putting on an air of dignified composure, she said, “I must confess I did listen at this doorway for a few moments; but it was only to ascertain who was within—inasmuch as the phantasy had seized me to come and pass half-an-hour with Mrs. Bredalbane, intelligence having reached me that she was somewhat indisposed.”

“Permit me, then, to observe,” said the Queen, with a prim starch aspect and a considerable acerbity of tone, “that is altogether contrary to Court etiquette, as well as being a breach of maiden propriety, to wander from one room to another between eleven and twelve o’clock at night. But come, grand-daughter: I wish to speak to you.”

“Good night, ladies,” said the Princess, casting upon the two Bed-chamber Women a look to assure them that the secret of their conversation on so ticklish a topic was safe with her: and she then followed the Queen away from the apartment.

“I have been seeking you in your own chamber, Charlotte,” said her Majesty, “because I wished to have some conver-

sation with you. Indeed, I was informed that you had dismissed your ladies for the night at an earlier hour than usual, but that you had not retired to rest; and this intelligence, added to your altered looks during the day, determined me to demand an explanation at your hands."

Thus spoke the Queen, as she led the way along the passage towards her royal grand-daughter's room. But just as they reached the threshold and the Princess caught a glimpse of the writing materials on the table, the re-collection instantaneously flashed to her that she had left the letter to her mother lying upon the table! The Queen, then, had perhaps read it? Yes—there was little doubt that such was the case; and thence that bitterness of tone and manner which her Majesty had shown towards her for the first time!

"Not finding you are now," said the Queen, as she advanced into the room, while the Princess followed, closing the door behind her,—*"I took the liberty of ascertaining what had been the nature of your most recent studies; and if I were therein guilty of an undue amount of curiosity, at all events it was not more reprehensible than that which you have just now shown in listening to the conversation of my Bed-chamber Women."*

The vein of sarcasm which began to penetrate through this speech from its commencement, increased in bitterness as her Majesty went on speaking; and as she gave utterance to the concluding words, her eyes settled upon the letter that lay on the table.

"I understand your Majesty," said the young Princess, her indignation suddenly aroused to a degree that armed her with a more than feminine courage; "you have been reading the letter which I inadvertently left here?"

"Yes.—I have read every word of it," responded the Queen, in a cold tone of defiance. "I have read how you dare accuse your own father, your uncles, myself, and several of the proudest nobles and most virtuous ladies in the country, of being engaged in a conspiracy——"

"It is true, madam, it is true!" exclaimed the young Princess, looking grandly handsome at that moment in the flush and the glow of the great indignation. "Even while compelled to admit that this eaves-dropping of to-night is not the first instance of the kind of which I have been guilty, I at once and unhesitatingly proclaim to your face that from your own lips have I heard the avowal of a conspiracy's existence!"

"You dare?" ejaculated the Queen, turning very pale, and with a strange quivering of the lips—for she knew not what to think.

"Yes, I dare, madam!" exclaimed the Princess, "I dare accuse you thus boldly; and I dare also aver that I listened and overheard every syllable that took place between your Majesty and Mrs. Owen yesterday. Hence that alteration in my looks which you have observed——"

"Ah! then denial will be useless," muttered the Queen between her false teeth; and drawing forth a snuff-box from her bag, she took a huge pinch of the stimulating powder; then, as if it had inspired her with the insolent spirit of one who boldly throws off the mask when it becomes impossible to wear it any longer—she said, "You and I had better understand each other at once, Charlotte. In that letter,"—and she pointed to the one upon the table,—*"you inform your mother that you have accidentally discovered the atrocious conspiracy which exists to ruin her, but that through the kindness of your aunt Sophia you expect to secure the services of a young gentleman whom you do not know otherwise than by name, in order to help your mother to frustrate the designs of her enemies: and this letter you promise to transmit by your new friend Mr. Jocelyn Loftus, provided you can in reality secure him as the champion of this cause! Now if, after reading that letter, I searched for you in all the adjacent rooms until I found you in Mrs. Bredalbane's antechamber, it was for the express purpose of letting you know at once that there is but one will in England at this moment which shall be paramount—and that is my will! You are not Queen yet; and unless you yield implicitly to my advice, you never shall be. Your own father would help to disinherit you in favour of one of his brothers, if you were to thwart his purposes. As for Sophia—the foolish minx!—how dares she interfere in these matters? As if she herself were so very immaculate!"—and the words came hissing from the Queen's mouth.*

"What! would you asperse the character of your own daughter?" exclaimed the young princess Charlotte, darting a look of mingled amazement and scorn upon her grandmother.

"I only meant to say," observed the Queen hurriedly—for she now repeated of the remark which she had let slip in her rage,—*"I only meant to say that Sophia has faults as well as the rest of the world."*

But let us not bandy unnecessary words. As for your letter, this is the way I serve it!"—and seizing hold of the epistle, she crumpled it up and tossed it into the fire.

"Then am I debarred the privilege of writing to my own mother?" asked the Princess, her countenance now becoming deadly pale and her lips quivering with indignation.

"You may write as much as you choose," responded the Queen, "so long as you mention naught contrary to my views. An opposite course can only have the tendency of producing the suppression of your letters."

"Ah! then an English Princess is a slave," cried Charlotte with flashing eyes, dilating nostrils, and swelling bust.

"Yes—a slave to the will that is paramount," replied the Queen, with the look of malignant triumph.

"But I would sooner be a beggar in the streets and enjoy freedom of action," exclaimed the outraged Charlotte, "than continue a Princess to be thus held in bondage!"

"We are not upon the stage of a theatre," said her Majesty; "and again I may remind you that you have not yet the opportunity of playing the tragedy-queen in all its reality. A truce, therefore, to these magnificent expressions and lofty complainings on your part. If you are disobedient, I shall know how to punish you, all princess and lineal heiress to the throne though you may be! For the present, if your life becomes one of prisonage and espionage, you have only yourself to thank for it. No more journeys to London, unless accompanied by me! Your rides, too, will be confined to the environs of Windsor; and if you order your coachman to proceed elsewhere, you will only subject yourself to the pain of refusal. As for this silly-affair of enlisting Mr. Jocelyn Loftus in your projects," added the Queen with a sneer, "depend upon it I shall find means to put a stop to any such ridiculous proceeding: and when you next meet your aunt Sophia, the best thing you can do will be to remain silent on the subject. Now do you understand me—and I wish you good night."

The young Princess made no reply, but turned away with swelling heart: and as the door closed behind her grandmother, she threw herself into an arm chair and burst into an agony of tears.

"This, this indeed is slavery!" she murmured to herself. "I am as much enchained as any one of those poor and oppressed millions who are compelled to

obey the despot rule of royal sway! The only difference between us is that *their* chains are of iron undisguised, while *mine* are gilt. Oh! my poor mother, am I indeed separated from thee by an impassable gulf!—may I not warn thee of the perils which the machinations of thine enemies are conjuring up around thee?—am I indeed a prisoner within these walls? But who will dare make me so?"

And rising from her seat with a sudden assumption of that dignified energy which so well became her, the Princess advanced towards the door. To her surprise the handle yielded to her touch: for she almost expected to find it locked. Then she paused, mistrustful as it were of being left thus far free: for she fancied either that the Queen was watching at the end of the passage, or that she had set spies upon her. But again recovering all her presence of mind, she issued forth from her room and proceeded along the passage, but without any definite aim.

Suddenly a thought struck her: and obeying the impulse of the idea, she knocked at the door of Mrs. Bredalbane's antechamber. The summons was almost immediately answered by Lady Prescott, who had not yet retired for the night, but was still keeping her invalid friend company. And here we may observe that her ladyship was a young widow, six and twenty years of age and exceedingly good looking. Her beauty was dark—her eyes were very fine—and her teeth were like ivory. As for her eyes—she now opened them wide with astonishment on beholding the Princess Charlotte returning thither after the taunts and reproaches she had received from the Queen.

"I wish to speak to you particularly," said the young Princess, passing into the antechamber. "Has Mrs. Bredalbane retired yet to rest?"

"No, your Royal Highness," said Lady Prescott; and hastening to draw aside the curtain in the doorway, she thus afforded ingress for the youthful Charlotte to the inner room.

"Now, ladies," said the Princess addressing herself in an earnest and serious manner to Mrs. Bredalbane and Lady Prescott, "I have done you a service to-night and am about to crave a boon in return. The service which I rendered you was by forbearing from mentioning to the Queen that conversation which, to speak candidly, I overheard from the very first syllable of the narrative down to where it was so suddenly interrupted by the

ejaculation which burst from my own lips on the appearance of her Majesty."

"Your Royal Highness heard all?" ejaculated the two Bed-chamber Women, as if speaking in the same breath.

"Yes—every syllable relative to my uncle Ernest—or the Duke of Cumberland, as I would rather call him," added the Princess with a shudder: "for if the dreadful suspicions which I have formed be true, I would rather not acknowledge him as a relative."

"Your Royal Highness must not judge too hastily," exclaimed Mrs. Bredalbane. "The remainder of my narrative——"

"Well, I long to hear it," interrupted the Princess: "but I dare not remain here many minutes now. The Queen is perhaps watching me—espying my actions—and she may either return to my room——"

"O heavens! if her Majesty should have seen your Royal Highness come hither!" cried the Hon. Mrs. Bredalbane. "She would discharge me at once——"

"No—the Queen did not see me come hither," said the Princess. "And recollect," she added proudly, "I may some day become Queen of England—and then I shall know how to reward those who serve me now."

"Your Royal Highness may command us in all things," said the two ladies, again speaking as it were in the same breath.

"A thousand thanks for this assurance!" exclaimed the Princess, in a tone of fervid gratitude. "Will you undertake to deliver or to forward a note from me to my aunt Sophia, as early as possible as possible to-morrow?"

"I have obtained leave to go to London to-morrow morning," said Lady Prescott: "and I will undertake to deliver your Royal Highness's note to the Princess Sophia."

"Then give me pen, ink, and paper," exclaimed Charlotte, in a joyous tone.

Writing materials being accordingly supplied her, she sat down and penned a few hasty lines to her aunt: then having folded, sealed, and addressed the letter she entrusted it to Lady Prescott, who solemnly reiterated her promise to deliver it next day.

"And now, dearest Princess," said Mrs. Bredalbane, in an imploring tone, "do pray return to your own chamber——"

"On one condition," exclaimed Charlotte: "which is, that you permit me to avail myself of the earliest opportunity to

visit your room again in order to hear rest of your narrative—and see that letter——"

"Yes, yes—whenever your Royal Highness thinks fit," ejaculated Mrs. Bredalbane. "But for to-night—Oh! not for worlds would I say another word upon the subject—the Queen has alarmed me so——"

"Well, my good friend, you shall be alarmed no longer: on my account" interrupted the Princess, with an amiable smile; and bidding the two ladies good night, she retraced her way to her own apartment.

There she retired to rest, to dream of her injured mother—Sellis—the Duke of Cumberland—the mysterious letter—the vixen Queen—and a host of fearful or unpleasant things, all confusedly jumbled.

CHAPTER CXIII.

THE PRINCESS SOPHIA AND HER

BROTHER.

It was about one o'clock on the day following the incidents just related: and the Princess Sophia had only just risen from her couch. She had not gone through the complete operations of the toilet: but with her hair negligently gathered up under a French cap, her luxuriant form wrapped in an elegant robe-de-chambre, and her feet thrust into satin slippers, she had thrown herself upon a sofa drawn near the fire in the dressing-room communicating with her bed-chamber. Under the plea of having letters to write, she had dismissed her attendant-ladies for the present; but scarcely had the door closed behind them and she found herself alone, when she pressed both her hands to her throbbing burning brows—as she murmured to herself, "Great God! the horrors of the past night!"

"Then, with her head hanging back over the cushion of the sofa and her hands still pressed against her forehead, she remained for some minutes motionless and silent, in an attitude of blank despair.

"Oh! it was indeed a night of horror," she murmured to herself again, as she at length slowly raised herself from that posture and withdrew her hands from her aching brows. "Heavens! the misery of that moment when my eager looks plunged into the recess, will haunt me to the last hours of my existence! But wherefore does

not my brother come? 'Tis one o'clock—and he promised to be here by midday.'

As thus she mused, her eyes remained fixed upon the time-piece towards which they were turned: tinted with the roseate hue caught from the crimson curtains, fell upon her countenance with a sort of Rembrandt effect, it showed off her finely shaped but sensuous profile to its best advantage. That rosy-tinted light imparted, too, a delicate bloom to her magnificent bust, which the negligent wrapper left more than half exposed; and her whole appearance was that of a woman formed to experience the raptures of love, and to kindle to the highest degree the flame of enjoyment on the part of him who might share love's pleasures with her. But the barbarian law enacted to prevent the blood of Royalty from mingling with that of a subject, had prevented that woman, so luxuriant in form and so voluptuous in disposition, from experiencing the lawful joys of love in the connubial state, and had forced her to gratify the arbour of her temperament by illicit amours. Oh! the atrocity of the Royal Marriage Act!—did it not make harlots of nearly all the daughters of George III? And this tremendous demoralization was allowed to take place rather than permit any of those royal ladies to become the wives of British citizens! What an idea must the monster King have had of the richness of his family-blood, when he took so much pains to prevent it from mingling with that of an English subject! No doubt the best blood that flowed in the veins of the oldest members of the aristocracy was but a plebeian puddle in his estimation. His family's blood indeed!—the idea of an Act of Parliament to protect that scrofulous, leprous, foully diseased blood from mingling with any other! Out upon the abhorrent mockery—let us heap loathing, hatred, and scorn upon the inhuman policy that devised the Royal Marriage Act.

To continue our narrative. The painful reverie of the Princess Sophia was suddenly interrupted by the entrance of one of her female attendants to announce that her brother the Prince Regent wished to see her immediately. Gathering the wrapper closely around her form, the Princess desired that he should be at once admitted: and in a few minutes his Royal Highness made his appearance. But his countenance was severe and even stern; and his manner was cold as he took a chair opposite to the sofa on which his sister was seated.

"Something is wrong, George?" she at once exclaimed, a mortal terror seizing upon her. "Tell me what it is—keep me not in suspense! I suppose the wound has proved fatal——"

"No—your son lives, and the wound is not mortal," said the Prince. "In fact, everything connected with last night's adventure is satisfactory enough, so far as we are concerned. But at the very time that I was arranging plans to gratify your wishes in respect to your son, you were plotting and intriguing against me—aye and with my own daughter too!"

"Ah! what mean you, George?" cried the Princess, flinging upon her brother a frightened look.

"Answer me one question immediately," he said, in a severe tone; and gazing upon her with a look which seemed to bid her beware how she deceived or trifled with him, he asked, "Have you written to a certain person styling himself Jocelyn Loftus——"

"Then Charlotte must have betrayed me!" exclaimed the Princess Sophia, the angry blood mantling upon her cheeks. "Oh! this is unkind—most unkind on her part——"

"No—my daughter is not a traitress of that ignoble stamp!" interrupted the Prince Regent. "But there is no necessity to practise any concealment nor affect any mystery in the affair. Charlotte penned a long letter last night to her mother—and that letter happened to meet the eyes of the Queen."

"Well, George," exclaimed the Princess Sophia, "I confess that I took compassion upon the distress of mind in which my niece was plunged—But are you aware of the extent of her knowledge?—do you know that your daughter——"

"I know everything," said the Prince. "Charlotte listened to some discourse which was taking place yesterday morning between her grandmother and Mrs. Owen—and misunderstanding one portion, and allowing her excited feelings to exaggerate another, and indeed mistaking the whole drift of the conversation——"

"Can I really believe you George?" asked the Princess Sophia, gazing up steadfastly into his face. "Because if you are telling me the truth, I should be so glad—so very glad—to learn that this conspiracy does not exist——"

"It does *not*" answered the Prince, with the most brazen effrontery, "nowhere except in the brain of my silly daughter. As a matter of course I have persons watching my wife's actions: that

I have reason for doing this, you may believe or not as you choose. At all events," added the Prince haughtily. "I am the best judge of my own private affairs. But as for any conspiracy for accusing my wife of crimes whereof she is not guilty—or in plain terms, of ruining an innocent woman—I pledge you my soul it is all a fable—a chimera."

And as the Prince gave utterance to this tremendous piece of perjury, he looked at his royal sister so steadily, so unblushingly, and with such an air of conscious integrity, that she was not merely staggered but positively persuaded he was speaking the truth.

"I am glad, my dear brother—nay, more than glad—positively delighted," she said, "to hear you speak in this manner. I confess that I have written a letter to a certain Mr. Jocelyn Loftus, whose name Charlotte mentioned to me, and who is supposed to be at Canterbury."

"Then the best thing you can do," interrupted the Prince, "is to write another letter and unsay all you have penned in the first: and at all events, if he should happen to come up to London, you will do well not to see him—for he is a mere adventurer—a profligate young scamp—"

"Indeed! is this his character?" exclaimed the Princess, in astonishment.

"It is," returned her brother; "and he goes about under a false name, practising his iniquities and pursuing his debaucheries. It was on that account he was imprisoned in Paris. But enough upon this subject: promise me that you will interfere no more in the affair—and all will be well."

"I promise you faithfully," answered the Princess: "and I will this very day write to Mr. Loftus to the effect that my letter of yesterday originated in a mistake. Should he come up to London before my second letter can reach him, I will give orders that he be not admitted."

"You will act wisely," said the Prince; "and when you have an opportunity, I beg you to counsel my daughter, and use your influence with her to curb this rebellious spirit of her's and not to give way to her own headstrong opinions. The Queen has sent me a long letter this morning about her: for it appears that some altercation took place between them last night. However I shall now look out for a husband for Charlotte; and when she is married, she will perhaps be less a source of uneasiness and vexation to me."

"But she is so very young!" exclaimed the Princess Sophia.

"Young!" echoed the Prince Regent: "why she is close upon eighteen years of age:"—then, bending a look of peculiar significance upon his sister, he said, "The females of our family, Sophia, cannot be married too early!"

The Princess's countenance, her neck and all that was seen of her shoulders, instantaneously became crimson as a peony: for those words smote her as a taunt and a reproach, her brother being well aware of her frailty.

"You might have spread that observation, George," she said, the tears starting forth upon her lashes.

"Well, well—I did not mean to afflict you," said the Prince, in a soothing tone, "It was a random remark, and not intended to wound your feelings. But now let me repeat for your consolation, that so far as the incidents of last night are concerned, we are safe enough."

"And he—the boy—my son," faltered the Princess, "is still at the surgeon's to whose house he was conveyed?"

"To be sure," returned the Prince. "You do not think that with such a wound, he could possibly be removed yet awhile. Besides, when he is convalescent where shall he be removed to? Not back to Fleet Lane——"

"Oh! no, no," exclaimed the Princess. "For heaven's sake never let him see that dreadful man again, Oh! the glimpse that I caught of his countenance was sufficient to make me shudder for the rest of my life, whenever his image starts up in my mind. But does he suspect—does he know who it was that thus swooned in the presence of that tragic spectacle?—did he, in a word, recognise me?"

"I do not think he did," answered the Prince: "but that he saw your face is probable, because your veil had blown aside where you fell."

"Tell me all the particulars," said the Princess: "give me those details of which I am as yet ignorant—how you got the boy away—whether any passers-by saw you——"

"I will satisfy you in a few words," said the Prince, "Coffin had not joined me more than a couple of minutes at the extremity of the bridge, and scarcely had I paid him the amount agreed upon for the night's service, when a female rushed past. She had on a cloak and thick veil, and seemed poorly clad: but the frantic pace at which she was speedily along, instantaneously attracted the notice of myself and Coffin. At the instant she passed us her veil blew aside; and we caught a glimpse

of her countenance. It was known to us both! No matter who the female was: suffice it for you to know that we did recognise her as she thus swept past like a maniac, or like one in a state of frenzied horror. But she saw not us. Coffin was about to pursue her: for he had certain reasons for wishing to speak to her—and those reasons also accounted for her being there at that time of night. But at the same instant—just as Coffin was on the point of springing forward and catching her by the arm—a fearful scream came thrilling through the night air. ‘*Hark!*’ exclaimed Coffin, clutching me by the arm: for we were both startled as suddenly as if the earth had been opening to swallow us up. But instantaneously feeling assured that something was wrong—struck by a presentiment that the shriek came from your lips—and not pausing to reflect upon the imprudence of bringing Coffin into contact with you, I sped along the bridge as if wings had suddenly fastened themselves to my feet. Coffin, who as well as myself had lost all further thought of that female who had swept past us so frantically, and whom we had recognized, was close at my heels. On gaining the recess, we beheld you, lying senseless upon the pavement, and the youth inside stabbed with a poniard. The truth flashed to my mind in a moment: and it simultaneously occurred to Daniel Coffin with equal force. We knew—we understood—we comprehended it all! ‘Twas the hand of the female whom I have mentioned that had done the deed!’

“Fortunate, then—Oh! most fortunate—was it for me,” exclaimed the Princess, “that accident should thus have shown you who the base assassin was. Otherwise the most terrible complication of circumstantial evidence would have pointed at me. Oh! I shudder—I shudder, when I reflect upon the risk that I ran and the horrors I encountered last night! But who,” suddenly demanded the Princess, “was the murderess? and what was the wretch’s motive?”

“Restrain your curiosity on this point,” said the Prince. “Suffice it for you to know that the female in question had some spite against Daniel Coffin; and hearing that he was to be upon the bridge last night she availed herself of the opportunity as she thought and hoped, to wreak her vengeance upon him—but by a fatal mistake she stabbed that unfortunate youth! There is no necessity to dwell upon these details. You do not require to be informed that on beholding the

tragic spectacle I was seized with horror and dismay. Fortunately not a soul was passing at the time—and to snatch you up from the pavement was my first impulse. You opened your eyes—your veil was away from your face—and you caught a glimpse of the countenance of Daniel Coffin. Then you fainted again—and I placed you on the seat in the recess. The next moment I turned my attention to the youth, and drawing out the dagger gave it to Coffin. Blood flowed from his breast: but I covered the wound with my handkerchief and a long gasp convinced me that the poor boy lived. At the same instant a hackney-coach was passing over the bridge: it was empty—we stopped it—the youth was lifted in—and I bade Coffin go with him to the surgeon’s in Bridge Street. That surgeon is known to me—and I told Coffin what to say. The coach drove away—and I breathed more freely. All these hurried, exciting, bewildering details had occupied nearly a minute. My attention was then again turned towards yourself: but you speedily recovered—and fortunately you were enabled to walk home.”

“Fortunately indeed!” ejaculated the Princess; “for what would the dependants of the palace have thought had they beheld me brought back in a swoon? But having seen me safe in my own apartments, you then hurried off to the surgeon’s.”

“Yes—I sped to Mr. Barrymore’s,” resumed the Prince; “and ascertained that the youth was not past all hope.”

“And though you were kind enough to come back to me with this assurance,” observed the Princess, “yet was I unable to subdue the horror of my thoughts. But it must have been very late when you got to bed—”

“It was barely one o’clock,” said the Prince Regent: “and that is not late for me. Only I would much rather have to sit up at night for more pleasant purposes. However, I left you with the promise of returning at noon to-day—and if I am an hour or so later than my promise, it is because of the arrival of a courier with that unpleasant letter from our mother—”

“But you have been to Mr. Barrymore’s?” said the Princess, anxiously.

“I have already told you so,” rejoined the Prince Regent. “The youth is out of danger—but still speechless. I invented some tale to account for my appearing in the matter—and the surgeon asks no questions. He is a discreet man. As for Coffin, I have not seen him since last night: but even if he did recognise you, it

matters little—for I have determined” added the Prince emphatically, “to rid myself of that fellow.”

“But how?” inquired the Princess Sophia, somewhat uneasily—as if she thought there was to be more bloodshed.

“Oh! I have a plan cut and dried!” exclaimed the Prince. “Indeed, it was all arranged ready for carrying into operation last night—and had that fellow once reached the receiving-ship off the Tower he would have suddenly ceased to be his own master. Yes—while your son was being placed on board one vessel for Canada, Coffin would have been shipped in another for the West Indies—Ah! it was splendidly arranged, I can tell you:—and the plan is only now delayed by these unforeseen occurrences—not altogether abandoned.

“I feel that I shall be more at ease when that dreadful man is out of the country,” said the Princess.

“He soon shall be,” rejoined the Prince. “And now I must take my departure. I have two matters to attend to this afternoon. One is a Privy Council, which is of little consequence: the other is a rehearsal for certain private theatricals, which is of very great consequence.”

“Private theatricals!” ejaculated the Princess “Where?”

“At Carlton House,” responded the Regent. “Will you come? Only the very, very select—the choicest *elite*, so to speak—can be admitted: and therefore I have had tickets duly printed. Here are a few for your own use;”—and he flung down half-a-dozen upon the table.

“Oh! I could not think of attending,” exclaimed the Princess Sophia, “with my mind agitated as it is! Take back your tickets—”

“No, no—you may choose to give them away to your very particular friends,” said the Prince. “Besides, the representation does not take place until to-morrow night—and by that time your spirits will be better. Try and come—it will be so amusing!”

With these words the Prince Regent took his departure, leaving his sister in doubt whether this facility wherewith he turned from disagreeable topics to scenes of diversion, arose from a naturally irrepressible gaiety or from a thorough heartlessness. But while still in the midst of conflicting speculations upon the point, one of her maids entered to announce Lady Prescott.

CHAPTER CXIV.

VISITORS AT SAINT JAMES'S.

When the usual civilities were exchanged between the Princess Sophia and Lady Prescott, the latter presented her Royal Highness with the note which she had promised the Princess Charlotte to deliver. Sophia instantaneously recognised the handwriting; and opening the billet in a hurried manner, she read the following lines:—

“Windsor Castle, Midnight.

“I have just now had a cruel scene with her Majesty. That you will hear of it from other quarters is tolerably certain, inasmuch as the Queen has discovered that you, my dear aunt, have given me your assistance in respect to my poor mother. I am very, very unhappy. Misfortunes seem to be gathering around me; and never, never did I so much require your consoling presence, your friendship, and your love. But wherefore do I not fly to you? Alas! I am now a prisoner at the Castle. My cruel grandmother—pardon me for speaking thus of your mother—has told me that I shall be a captive; and my very servants, when I ride out in my carriage or on horseback, are to perform the parts of spies, gaolers, and guards! It is only through the kindness of Lady Prescott that I am enabled thus to communicate with you. Come to me when you can: but pray do not let any steps the Queen may take, prevent you from seeing Mr. Loftus. If he should not respond to your summons, I implore you to seek some trusty messenger who will bear a letter of warning, which you must write to my dear mother. Oh! do not fail in all this. My whole and sole trust is now in you, my dearest aunt! Do not write to me about these matters: all letters will assuredly be intercepted. But come to me when you can: for I am very, very unhappy!”

This letter was by no means calculated to soothe the troubled mind of the Princess Sophia: and when Lady Prescott had taken her departure, her Royal Highness fell into a painful reverie. As if her own cares furnished not sufficient food for her infelicitous meditation, she had now the sorrows of her niece to mingle with her own. But could it be really true that no conspiracy was on foot against the Princess Caroline?—could she believe the assurances which her brother the Prince Regent had given her upon this subject? She was

inclined to do so, because it was no doubt difficult for a daughter to believe that her own mother—and that mother, the Queen of England—would be engaged in such a plot. And yet the Princess still had her doubts and was tortured with cruel uncertainties: and she resolved to take no farther step in the matter until she had naturally considered it in all its bearings. She did not therefore write to Jocelyn Loftus a second letter according to her promise to the Prince Regent: nor did she issue any orders against his admission to her presence, should he call at St. Jame's Palace. Neither did she repair to Windsor to confer with her afflicted niece: but she postponed all farther proceedings until the morrow.

And when the morrow came, what did it bring forth? It was a little past noon and the Princess Sophia was seated in her drawing-room,—not in the negligee of a boudoir, but in an elegant morning costume—when a footman entered to announce that a gentleman who had given the name of Mr. Loftus, requested an audience of her Royal Highness. The Princess hesitated for a few moments: but at length she resolved to see him—and dismissing the ladies who were in attendance, she ordered the domestic to introduce Mr. Loftus.

The moment Jocelyn entered the room, the Princess Sophia was struck with an impression entirely in his favour. It was not because he was so faultlessly handsome, of such a symmetrical form and fascinating appearance—although these qualifications might at any other time have had their weight with the Princess, whose temperament was sensuous even to a devouring fervour: but it was rather because the noblest thoughts were so indelibly stamped upon the young man's brow, and because the first look which he threw upon the Princess convinced her that the eyes which sent forth this glance were the index of a soul loftily chivalrous, sublimely magnanimous, and full of the most unsophisticated candour. Indeed, it was impossible to survey this young man and believe that he was otherwise than everything honourable and creditable to human nature.

With a sweet affability, the Princess Sophia requested him to be seated; and entering at once upon the subject which had brought them together, she said "I thank you, Mr. Loftus, for this prompt attention to my letter."

Jocelyn bowed, making some suitable answer; and the Princess continued—

"My letter was necessarily brief, for several reasons. In the first place, I was writing to a gentleman whose acquaintance I had not *then* the honour to possess: secondly, I knew not whether the letter would reach you, or into whose hands it might fall; and thirdly, I was not altogether sure that the information I had received concerning you might be correct."

"And may I ask your Royal Highness what that information is?" said Jocelyn.

That you have interested yourself deeply in the affairs of her Royal Highness the Princess Caroline—that you have suffered imprisonment in France on account of the chivalrous enterprise on which you have embarked—and that you have recently been rescued by some Englishmen from the hands of the French police agents."

"All this is perfectly true," said Jocelyn:—then after a brief pause, and with some little hesitation, he observed, "Your Royal Highness will excuse me if I ask how all these facts became known to you?"

"I understand you, Mr. Loftus," said the Princess, a blush mounting to her cheeks; "you fear—and your apprehension is natural—that inasmuch as I am acquainted with all these particulars, I must necessarily be in the conspiracy which you no doubt suppose to exist in respect to the Princess Caroline. But when you have read this letter, you will see that you have no ground for any such alarm."

Thus speaking, the Princess Sophia handed to our hero the letter which she had received from her niece the day before through the medium of Lady Preacott: then, so soon as Jocelyn had perused this communication, her Royal Highness proceeded to explain to him how the Princess Charlotte had overheard the conversation on the part of the Queen and Mrs. Owen.

"I am now convinced," said Jocelyn "that your Royal Highness has really nothing to do with this dreadful conspiracy. But you will excuse me if at first I proceeded with perhaps more caution than courtesy—"

"You are quite right, Mr. Loftus," said the Princess. "But my brother, the Prince Regent assures me solemnly that there is no conspiracy at all—"

"From the lips of Miss Agatha and Miss Emma Owen," observed Loftus emphatically, "have I received the admission that they are both engaged in such a conspiracy. That their sister Miss Julia is likewise an accomplice, is beyond all question; and the youngest sister Miss

Mary, now at Canterbury—as your Royal Highness has heard—can confirm the sad truth. Besides, numerous other incidents corroborate the existence of the conspiracy and point to the conspirators.”

Jocelyn thereupon entered into a few hurried details connected with his imprisonment at the Prefecture—showing by the proposals which the Prefect had made him as the price of freedom that such a conspiracy did positively exist, and that the conspirators must be chiefly personages of the highest rank and influence thus to have been able to set the machinery of French policeism and tyranny at work in respect to an Englishman whose only crime was harbouring the intent of warning the Princess Caroline against her enemies!

Sophia was convinced: all doubt and uncertainty vanished—and she perceived that her brother was wilfully perjured when he pledged his soul against the existence of this conspiracy. But there was still one point concerning which she required some little reassurance.

“Mr. Loftus,” she said, “we are met to discourse on a serious subject, and we must stand upon no reserve with each other. You fancied just now that I might be one of the conspirators—and I have proved to you that I am not. Now I seek equal candour at your hands. I have been informed that you are not precisely honest in your present intentions—that you pass under a false name—”

A peculiar smile gradually appeared upon Jocelyn’s classically chiselled lips as the Princess thus spoke hesitatingly and timidly: but it was a smile, not of conscious guilt preparing to veil itself under the mask of sophistry or effrontery—it was the smile of sublime confidence which the honourable and virtuous man puts on when he bears an accusation which he can easily explain or a calumny which he can readily refute. He thereupon entered into certain details which we are not permitted at present to reveal to the reader, but which the Princess Sophia heard with mingled astonishment and satisfaction—the latter sentiment being experienced because she was well pleased that a young man who had already made so favourable an impression on her mind, could prove not only that he was as honourable as he was handsome, but that his honour was of the most magnanimous and lofty description.

For a long time did they continue in earnest and confidential discourse. They view the position of the Princess of Wales in all its bearings: they scanned all its

difficulties; and they studied all the obstacles which would have to be encountered by any one who strove to succour that unfortunate Princess.

“Know you,” inquired Sophia, after a brief pause. “Who those Englishmen were that assisted you to escape in France?”

“I am still entirely in the dark on that head,” replied Loftus. “The only clue that I at present possess is confined to such meagre evidences as that one was called ‘my lord,’ another ‘captain,’ and a third Robin: but from certain particulars mentioned in a few notes which passed between me and my unknown friends just prior to my release, I have every reason to suppose that Miss Clara Stanley, the elder sister of the young lady to whom I am engaged to be married, was the instigatrix of my deliverance. I shall call upon Miss Stanley either this afternoon or to-morrow, and perhaps ascertain from her the whole particulars.”

“Then, on your release,” said the Princess, with an arch smile, “you did fly back to Canterbury to behold your Louisa?”

“Yes: and does your Royal Highness blame me,” cried Jocelyn, “if I considered it to be my first duty to convince that dear girl of my safety ere I adopted some new project on behalf of the Princess Caroline? But I have only been in England three days: for within a few hours after my rescue in the manner I have described to your Royal Highness, I had to separate from my unknown friends, assume a disguise, and proceed on foot all the way to Havre, because I had no passport. At Havre I waited till I could obtain a passage for Southampton; and thence I travelled day and night to Canterbury, without passing through London on my way thither. But I am detaining your Royal Highness with my own private concerns, while I ought to be conversing only on the one grand subject of our interview. Had your letter not reached me at Canterbury, I should have started off again in a few days for the Continent—taking care, however, to avoid France. My idea was to pass through Belgium and proceed along the Rhine—”

“And why not still adopt that plan?” asked the Princess. “I will furnish you with letters to my injured sister-in-law—”

“An idea struck me as I journeyed up to London yesterday on receipt of your Royal Highness’s letter: and that is,” continued Jocelyn “if I could only procure an interview with the Prince Regent I would

appeal to him on behalf of his persecuted wife——"

"But he would not hear you!" exclaimed the Princess.

"Oh! I would force him to hear me," replied Loftus, his cheeks flushing with the generous enthusiasm that inspired his heart. "I feel that I should become so eloquent while pleading such a holy cause, that I am almost inclined to hope I should be enabled to produce some little impression upon the mind of his Royal Highness. At all events, if I failed, I should be cheered by the consciousness of having done my duty: and that very failure would nerve me with a determination all the more deeply fixed to defend the Princess Caroline against her enemies."

As Jocelyn Loftus was thus speaking, the eyes of the Princess wandered from his countenance to the mantelpiece in the vacant abstraction of her thoughts: and her glance encountered the admission-tickets which her brother had given her on the previous day and which were now struck in a card-rack by the side of the mirror.

"I have it!" she suddenly exclaimed. "There will be no harm in trying what effect your eloquence may have upon the Prince Regent. At all events, the experiment is one suggested by humanity, kindness, and the best of feelings. But I know that my brother will not voluntarily give you an audience——"

"If I could only meet his Royal Highness somewhere," exclaimed Jocelyn,—"if I could but obtain admission into Carlton House——"

"You shall—you shall!" ejaculated the Princess. "See—here is such a talisman as you require!"—and as she spoke her Royal Highness took one of the admission-tickets from the card-rack and handed it to Jocelyn, who received it with mingled gratitude and exultation.

He then took his departure, with a promise to call again at St. James's Palace on the following day.

CHAPTER CXV.

THE PRIVATE THEATRICALS.

The reader will remember that magnificent saloon at Carlton House where the dance of the aristocratic young ladies took place, and whence there was a communication by means of a glass-door with an antechamber. This saloon was now fitted

up as a private theatre. A stage had been erected with wings, shifting scenes, a curtain, foot-lights, trap-doors, and all the usual contrivances and arrangements belonging to efficient dramatic representation. On the floor were placed rows of cushioned seats: and along the sides, as well as at the extremity facing the stage, elegantly furnished boxes were erected. A door had been purposely pierced at the extremity, under the central boxes to serve as an entrance for the audience; and it was covered with curtains of purple velvet having gold fringes that swept the floor. A place for the orchestra was built in front of the stage; and several pieces of music had been composed expressly for the occasion.

The antechamber adjoining the saloon was converted into a Green Room, an ascent of steps leading from the glass-door upon the stage. The whole arrangements had taken place under the superintendence of an eminent theatrical manager; and as money was never spared in gratifying the expensive whims and costly caprices of the Prince Regent,—a remark which may be applied without single exception to all the members of Royalty from William the Conqueror down to the present day,—every requisite which gold could procure to perfect the elegance, the splendour, and the richness of his *bijou* theatre had been obtained.

At six o'clock in the evening the Prince Regent gave a sumptuous banquet to all the *amateur* actors and actresses who were to take part in the performances, as well as to take a select number of persons who were to constitute the audience. At this splendid festival his Royal Highness wore a Court dress, with the Order of the Garter. On his right hand sate Lady Sackville—the brilliant Venetia—the glory of whose transcending charms appeared not only fit to bask in that blaze of light, but also calculated to enhance the dazzling lustre which, shed from the crystal chandeliers and reflected in the superb mirrors, flooded the banquetting-room. There also was Lady Curzon—another grand beauty belonging to the sphere of aristocracy and fashion. Miss Bathurst, Mrs. Arbuthnot, and her daughter Penelope were likewise there, thanks to special invitations sent them by Venetia; and through the interest of the Countess of Curzon Lady Lechmere had likewise procured admission to this select circle. Lady Prescott, who was only in the second year of her widowhood, but had laid aside her weeds and was said to be looking out for

another husband, was also present. In addition to these ladies, were at least twenty others—Duchesses, Marchionesses, Countesses, and Baronesses—very many of whom had at different times been honoured with the smiles of the Prince Regent and had bestowed their favours upon him in return.

We said that Venetia sat next to the Prince: but on her right hand was Sir Douglas Huntingdon, who was however careful not to regard her with any undue familiarity that might betray the intimacy subsisting between them. The Earl of Curzon was also present; and at first he had felt a little piqued at not being enabled to find a seat next to Venetia—for he little thought that the baronet had quite as much claim upon her favour as he himself could advance. Indeed, the Baronet's pretensions were in reality the greater: because, although they had both rendered Venetia signal services and each had received his reward, yet he it recollected that the Earl of Curzon had obtained that reward through a mistake in the famous boudoir-scenes, whereas Venetia had voluntarily and indeed designedly abandoned herself to Sir Douglas Huntingdon. But if the Earl of Curzon had now failed to place himself next to Lady Sackville, he was somewhat indemnified by having the handsome and dark-eyed Lady Prescott on his right hand; and he soon found that the widow was not only very amiable, good-tempered, and entertaining, but that she also knew how to fling most mischievous sidelong glances from beneath the jetty fringes of her eyelids.

Lord Sackville was of course present and he was seated next to Lady Curzon to whom he comported himself with a courtesy wherein there was an infusion of tenderness which the lady herself failed not to perceive, but which was not very generally observed around the table. The Marquis of Leveson was not amongst the guests: Venetia, who had superintended the invitations, had purposely omitted him—and the Prince was too much absorbed in the gaiety of the scene and the pleasures of the table to remark his absence. Besides, there was no

lack of Dukes, Marquises, Earls and Barons; and thus the brilliant company comprised about fifty guests, all bent upon enjoying themselves during the evening to any extent that the general feeling might conventionally carry them.

At eight o'clock the ladies withdrew to take coffee in the drawing-room: and soon afterwards those who were to appear in the dramatic representation, retired to undergo the operations of the toilette. At half-past eight the gentlemen quitted the dinner-table and joined those ladies who still remained in the drawing-room: but at nine o'clock there was a general summons to repair to the saloon fitted up as the theatre. All those personages, male and female, who had been fortunate enough to procure admission-tickets were already assembled in the theatre; and when those ladies and gentlemen who had been the Prince's guests at dinner, but who were not to take part in the representations, made their appearance and took their seats in the boxes reserved for them, the entire portion allotted to the audience was filled with the most brilliant assemblage. Indeed, to gaze upon that scene where Court dresses and scarlet uniforms mingled with the elegant apparel of the ladies—where ostrich plumes and bird-of-paradise feathers waved above many a high and polished brow—were coronals of artificial flowers, wreaths of pearls, and tiaras of diamonds shone upon glossy hair or gave effect to hyperion tresses—where bright eyes reflected the light that poured down from the crystal chandeliers, and the crimson hue of the draperies imparted a roseate tint to that flood of lustre in which naked shoulders, bare arms, and half-exposed bosoms seemed dazzling as alabaster—and where stars, orders, and decorations shone upon the breasts of peers, officers, and jewels of incalculable price gleamed upon the dresses of the ladies,—to gaze upon this scene we say, was to feel the head turning with the bewilderment of intoxication and the eyes becoming dazzled with this galaxy of diamonds, ornaments, flashing eyes, and natural charms!

But oh! if at the same instant the thoughts could only have travelled to the dens of poverty on Saffron Hill, the haunts of squalor and of wretchedness in Spital-fields and Whitechapel, the abodes of vice and the resorts of crime in the Mint of Southwark, and the low neighbourhoods of demoralization and famine which lie in the vicinage of Westminster Abbey,—or if the imagination, at once taking a wider range

and starting off to a greater distance could only have pictured to itself the pale, pining, perishing factory-slave of Lancashire, or the toil-crushed, persecuted, and down-trampled miner of the North, or the poor labourer in the agricultural district, hugging the iron chain of serfdom through the brutalizing ignorance in which the despot's cunning purposely keeps him—Oh! then what a hideous picture would the woes, the miseries, the sufferings and the wrongs of the millions have furnished in contrast with that scene of splendour, brilliancy, and luxurious ease presented to the view at the private theatre of Carlton House!

But to return to our tale. In the midst of that brilliant assemblage—or rather, retiring from where the blaze of beauty and of jewels was not dazzling,—almost shrinking, then, we might say, into the farthest corner—was one young gentleman who in his apparel, his looks, and his thoughts, constituted the sole exception to the splendour, the gaiety, and the innate profligacy which characterised all the rest. This young man was Jocelyn Loftus well dressed, it is true, in his usual genteel style, he nevertheless rejoiced in no riband, star, garter, or other decoration. Neither was he accompanied by any lady who looked amorously upon him or suffered her knees to press against his own; nor did he take any real pleasure in the scene before him. At the same time, if he felt himself out of place there and in an unsuitable element, it was not that he was overawed by the presence of the Aristocracy, or that he was awkward or embarrassed as if amongst his superiors and betters. No—it was because his lofty mind condemned all the frivolity, the gaud, the grandeur, the pomp, and the display assembled and indeed personified there—it was because his elevated character made him despise that throng, brilliant though it were, as nothing more than a gathering of titled brigands and aristocratic demi-reps—it was because he regarded them all as the representatives, the votaries and the supporters of a system which invests the few with inordinate wealth and plunges the millions into the direst poverty!

He was there only because he had a self-imposed duty to perform: he was there, also, by virtue of the admission-ticket which he had received from the Princess Sophia; and his object, as the reader already knows, was to seek the opportunity of an interview with the Prince Regent. But, Oh! as he glanced around upon those ladies of rank, wealth,

and fashion—as he beheld the shameless, exposure of their charms, observed the looks which they exchanged with the titled profligates respectively seated next to them, and saw them basking as it were in the voluptuous lights which the devouring eyes of lasciviousness shed upon them in return—and as he unavoidably caught the tenour of the remarks which fell from rosy lips or were wafted in wanton whispers to greedily listening ears—he could not help thanking heaven that he had been gifted with courage, and sense, and virtue sufficient to enable him to abjure the atmosphere of fashion—that atmosphere which is like the south-wind of oriental climes, laden with the fragrance of earth's loveliest flowers, but bearing pestilence upon its wing!

But let us now glance into the Green Room where the *amateur* performers were by this time assembled. All the indelicacies of the real stage-costume—or rather, of the ballat-apparel at the Opera—had been adopted by these fashionable imitators. It would almost seem as if the positive agreement had been, or at all events as if the tacit understanding were, that the ladies who were to take part in the proceedings should be attired in a drapery as gauzy and as scanty as possible. Thus the fine person of Venetia was exposed to an extent that left little scope for the exercise of fancy and gave small opportunity of guesses. Not only were her fine plump shoulders completely bare, but the grand amplitude of her bust, was revealed to the eye in a manner which outraged all modesty. Indeed, so large a portion of her bosom was left bare that it was by no means difficult for imagination to fill up the picture in all its voluptuous perfection. Her dress was not only thus low in the body, but it was equally scant in the skirt; and the splendid symmetry of her limb was accurately portrayed by the flesh-coloured silk that covered them with such tight-fitting accuracy. Her splendid arms, white and glowing were naked to the shoulders; and thus was her superb form exposed so that every line could be traced—every deflection and inflection, every sinuosity and swelling charm, every curve and contour could be faithfully followed by the gloating of the observer.

Lady Curzon, who had likewise undertaken a part in the performances of the evening, was apparelled in a manner to set off her own beauties to their utmost advantage. She wore her raven hair in ringlets, which showered like shining jet upon her finely-shaped shoulders: where-

as Venetia had her auburn hair arranged in massive bands and ornamented with flowers. The other ladies who were to take part in the drama, were attired in dresses as gauzy and transparent as those of Venetia and Editha : and nothing could be more voluptuous—nothing better calculated to excite the most laggard passion or fire the fervid ones to frenzy—than this assemblage of beauties so sensuously so shamelessly exposed ! The prince Regent retained his Court dress, which became the character indicated by the piece for him to perform. Lord Curzon was disguised as an old astrologer ; but Sir Douglas Huntingdon and several other noblemen and gentlemen who formed part of the *amateur corps*, retained the same apparel in which they had appeared at the banquet.

The opening piece was called *The King and the Sea Nymphs*, and had been written on purpose for the occasion. Its plot was meagre—its structure slight ; but it abounded in brilliant and sparkling dialogue, and admitted of all the exciting effects to be produced by voluptuous *tableaux*.

But avoiding minute details as much as possible, let us resume the thread of our narrative and at once pass from the Green Room to the stage. A silver bell tinkled ; and the orchestra—for we should have observed that there was a splendid band present played a piece of music that stole softly and wantonly upon the senses. Again the bell chimed, after a short space and the curtain drew up, revealing the Prince Regent who appeared alone upon the stage. He was of course greeted with loud applause, which he acknowledged with that gracefulness of salutation which formed one of the qualities that had obtained for him the distinction of "the first gentleman of Europe." The stage represented the interior of an *Astrologer's house*, and from a soliloquy which the Prince delivered, it appeared that this *Astrologer* not only read the stars but also human hearts and was consulted as much in love matters as upon any other subject. It farther appeared that the Prince who represented the character of *King of the City of Pleasures*, had come thither for the purpose of ascertaining from the lips of the *Astrologer*, which of the twelve mistress whom he possessed, had proved faithless to him ; inasmuch as he had intercepted an anonymous letter crammed full of love protestations, but being without the envelope that had originally accompanied it he was at a

loss to ascertain to which particular fair one it was addressed. Having thus made known in the form of a soliloquy, the object of his visit to the *Astrologer*, the *King of the City of Pleasures* awaited the learned man's presence. Nor did he wait long : for in a few minutes Lord Curzon, clothed in the robes and wearing the cap of a sage made his appearance : and having heard the *King's* tale, he proceeded to consult a huge book of magic, charms and other cabalistic devices, inspired with the suggestions of the great book, the learned *Astrologer* proceeded to inform the *King* that if he laid down to sleep on a certain magic couch, the *Sea Nymphs* would come to talk to him in his dreams and answer all the questions that he might put to them. The *King* of course rewarded the *Astrologer* handsomely : and away he went. But scarcely had he disappeared from the stage, when Lady Curzon, enveloped in a cloak, representing *Adeliza*, one of the *King's* twelve mistresses, also came to consult the *Astrologer*. Her dilemma consisted in the loss of a note which she prized very highly and which she was fearful might fall into hands where the writing would be recognized. The *Astrologer*, laughing in his sleeve at the coincidence which greatly amused him, directed *Adeliza* to go and induce all her fellow-mistresses to dress up as *Sea Nymphs*, and watch for an opportunity when the *King* should be sleeping, to gather round him and play their practical jokes upon his Majesty : for the *Astrologer* assured her that if she did this and watched her opportunity to introduce her fingers into the *King's* right-hand waistcoat pocket, she would inevitably recover the last note. Highly pleased with this advice, *Adeliza* bestowed a handsome reward on the *Astrologer*, and took her departure.

Such was the first scene of the drama ; and it passed off to the infinite delight of all present—with the sole exception of Jocelyn Loftus, whose thoughts were bent on far more serious subjects. The curtain fell ; and when it rose again the stage represented a splendid garden. The *King of the City of Pleasures* was now discovered reclining on the magic couch which the *Astrologer* had lent him, and which was supposed to be placed in the summer house on the grounds belonging to the royal palace. The *Astrologer*, who was a funny fellow in his way, had contrived this magic couch to be as uneasy as possible ; and the *King* amused the audience by many ejaculatory

complaints uttered in the way which on the stage is called *aside*, but which means that such remarks are to be made louder than any others! And now, to the sound of delicious music, did the *Sea Nymphs* make their appearance, Venetia as their *Queen* bearing a wand in her hand.

But here we must interrupt the progress of our narrative for a moment to observe that had it not been for the enthusiastic outburst of applause which welcomed Venetia and her fair companions, and ejaculation that fell from the lips of Jocelyn Loftus would have startled every one present. It was an ejaculation of utter amazement—an ejaculation which he could not have suppressed had the utterance of it cost him his life at the same moment! But fortunately for him it was lost and absorbed in the loud and prolonged welcome that greeted the train of aristocratic actresses.

Over the heads of the applauding throng that occupied the cushioned seats in what may be termed the pit of the theatre—from his retired corner, were the looks of Jocelyn fixed upon one of those lightly-dressed and semi-nude beauties representing the *Sea Nymphs*. Could it be possible?—was it indeed *she*—or only a wondrous, marvellous resemblance? And yet it was scarcely possible to err? There was the same classic outline of the profile—the same grandeur of form—the same look; there were the same lips—the same unmistakable expression of the eyes;—and there also was the bright glory of the auburn hair.

A certain sickening sensation came over Loftus—a tightening of the heart strings; and he felt as if he were almost about to faint. Passing his hand over his eyes, as if to dissipate any delusion that had started up before him he again fixed his looks upon that resplendent creature who had thus so deeply, deeply absorbed all his interest: and the longer he gazed, the more convinced became he that it was no mere resemblance on the part of *another*—but *she herself*, whom he remembered so completely and so well.

But what name did she bear at Carlton House?—in a word, who was she? He was about to lean forward and ask the question of the gentleman who sat nearest to the corner where he had placed himself: but suddenly recollecting that on presenting his admission-ticket in the hall below, he had received a programme of the representations printed upon white velvet, he drew it abruptly forth from the pocket

into which he had thrust it and where it had remained forgotten until this moment. Hastily unfolding it, but with fingers that trembled nervously, Loftus looked to ascertain who was performing the character of *Queen of the Sea Nymphs*. But the velvet programme dropped from his hands as he read the name of LADY SACKVILLE!

"I understand it all now," he murmured to himself, and sank back into his corner with feelings that defy all power of description.

For several moments did he remain absorbed in reflections of a character as painful as they were conflicting. In the meantime the action of the drama progressed upon the stage, to the infinite delight of all present, save our astounded, dismayed, and afflicted hero. Venetia, in the capacity of *Queen of the Sea Nymphs* had to deliver several speeches replete with brilliant wit and sparkling humour; and these she enunciated in a style that, joined with the soul-seeking melody of her harmonious voice, produced a thrilling effect upon the audience. Lady Curzon's performance was also highly effective: and there was a scene where Venetia had to apostrophise the sleeping *King of the City of Pleasures*, during which *Adeliza* seized the opportunity to fall upon her knees and get back her note from the *King's* pocket. That portion of the performance elicited great applause: and it was just at this point that Jocelyn Loftus, awaking from his reverie, again fixed his eyes earnestly, attentively, and scrutinizingly upon Venetia in order to clear up any doubts which might remain in his mind relative to the idea he had conceived. But the longer he surveyed that splendid creature, whose animated complexion now gave increased brilliancy and effect to her faultless features, and who availed herself of every opportunity permitted by the part she was enacting to exhibit all the charming graces of her person and all the seductive witticisms of her exquisite beauty,—the less room was there for doubt. Indeed as the music of her delicious voice floated through the warm and perfumed atmosphere of that brilliantly-lighted saloon, its accents, its harmony, its intonations, all fell familiarly upon Jocelyn's ear!

He was now seized with a sudden repugnance to remain in that place any longer. The atmosphere grew oppressive to him: it seemed as if he were breathing the air exhaled by all that is profligate, immoral, meretricious, and foul in the sphere of rank and fashion. He even felt as if he

were committing a crime by lingering in so tainted an atmosphere. Seizing his hat, he resolved to take his departure at once; and accordingly issued forth by the door covered with the purple velvet curtains; but scarcely had he set foot on the landing outside, when he recollected that the whole and sole object in coming to Carlton House at all was to obtain an interview with the Prince Regent, and in this aim he did not wish to be disappointed. He therefore accosted a footman, saying, "I feel too indisposed to remain in the saloon any longer, but I am most desirous to say a few words to his Royal Highness before I take my departure. Will you be so kind as to show me to a room where I can wait until the representation is over?"

The footman instantaneously complied with this request, and escorted our hero to an adjacent parlour, where a lamp was burning.

"What name shall I mention to his Royal Highness?" asked the footman, as he held the door ajar.

"Give me writing materials, and I will pen a few lines, which you can hand to his Royal Highness immediately after the performance."

Jocelyn's request was obeyed; and having written a note earnestly and solemnly imploring an interview with the Prince, he folded, sealed, and gave it to the footman. The domestic retired—and our young hero, being left alone, relapsed into a train of gloomy reflections.

Thus three hours dragged their slow length away; and, in the meantime, let us see what was taking place in another part of Carlton House.

The performances were over, and the larger portion of the audience had taken their departure to their own residences: but the more immediate friends of the Prince—indeed, the same who had dined with him previous to the commencement of the amateur-representation—assembled in the supper-room, where an elegant repast was served up. The ladies who had figured in the performance, retained their gauzy raiment; and thus the board seemed to be embellished with the exposed charms and wanton looks of courtezans, rather than of ladies priding themselves on their lofty rank, and standing as it were on the highest pedestals of the social sphere.

As the wine circulated freely after supper, and the coral lips of beauty sipped the champagne nectar of Epernay, the colour deepened upon the cheeks—the eyes flashed more brightly—the regards became

more tender and more wanton—the conversation grew more free—and the little familiarities of friendly conviviality became enhanced into positive license. Venetia again sate next to Sir Douglas Huntingdon; the Earl of Curzon had managed to re-monopolize the handsome widow Lady Prescott, who, he it observed, appeared nothing loth thus to receive his attentions:—while the Countess of Curzon was again the companion of Venetia's husband, Lord Sackville. As for the Prince Regent, he drank so copiously that he was soon in a very agreeable state of intoxication; and thus devoting himself entirely to the bottle—or rather to the bowl of curacao-punch—he ceased to take notice of his guests, and was taken little notice of by them. Jocelyn's note had been put into his hand: but after hastily scanning its contents he consigned it to his waistcoat-pocket, and soon forgot all about it.

At length his Royal Highness fell asleep in his chair, and then the company began to break up. Lord Curzon conducted Lady Prescott to her carriage, and pressed her hand as he took leave of her, a pressure that was assuredly returned, though slightly and timidly perhaps. He then sought his own carriage, to which his wife had just been escorted by Lord Sackville; and as the Earl and Editha thus rode home together, a somewhat interesting as well as curious discourse took place between them. Of this, however, we shall say more anon. Meantime let us hasten to state that Sir Douglas Huntingdon and the other guests having all taken their departure, Lord and Lady Sackville withdrew to their own chamber—where they passed the rest of the night together in each other's arms, but inspired only by the appetite of passion and not by the tenderness of love.

The Prince had been left sleeping in his chair; but when the domestics aroused him for the purpose of conveying his Royal Highness to his chamber, he repelled their services—overwhelmed them with drunken oaths—and swore that he was as sober as any man in Christendom. Thereupon, one of the lacqueys ventured to remind him that the gentleman who had sent the letter was still waiting; and the Prince, having some vague and confused idea of the circumstance, declared that he would see Mr. Loftus without delay.

But in the meantime, was not Jocelyn wearied of thus waiting? Yes—nevertheless, he waited still, because he deemed it his duty to see the Prince if possible. It was now one o'clock in the morning: more than three hours had passed and, nobody

came. Fancying that himself and his note must have been alike forgotten, he was about to ring the bell—when the door suddenly opened. Jocelyn rose on catching sight of the Prince; but he was at the same moment struck with stupefaction on observing his Royal Highness stagger forward a pace or two—then reel sideways—then totter back as if about to fall—then stagger forward again—and then advance with a rolling, reeling, staggering gait, and in a zig-zag manner, towards the spot where Jocelyn remained transfixed. The truth became apparent enough—the Prince Regent was in a beastly state of intoxication!

Heavens, what a spectacle! His wig was all dishevelled and awry, pushed completely round upon his head, so that the wavy curls which were usually worn in front, were now just above the right ear: his eyes were bloodshot—his cheeks flushed to a degree that seemed to portend apoplexy—his under-jaw hanging down, and thus giving an air of hebetation and stolid vacancy to his countenance. Add to these symptoms the disordered shirt-frill—the waistcoat unbuttoned and covered with venous stains—and the hands thrust rakishly into the breeches-pocket, and the reader may form an idea of the pretty figure which his Royal Highness cut upon the present occasion.

Jocelyn was grieved as well as astonished. Yes—grieved, because he felt how deplorable was the political system that gave the country a beastly sensualist to rule over it—grieved, because his own noble pride as a man was shocked at beholding the utter degradation of one who had such golden opportunities of being the brightest ornament of his species—grieved, too, because he saw all in an instant how utterly useless were the pains he had taken to procure this interview.

"Well—eh—sir-rah, wha-a-t the deuce has brought you here—eh?" faltered the Prince as he staggered up to Jocelyn, and then stood reeling, inclining, bending, and tottering, as if he were endeavouring to balance himself upon a tight-rope. "So you sent me—hic—a note—ote—eh?—begging an inter—what the devil d'y'e call it—hic—inter-view—that's it. Well—el—now you've got your wish—ish—and so out with it—hic—hic—damu this floor—it's so uneven—I can't keep—eep—my—my—bal—al—al—ance!"

And after several vain and ineffectual endeavours to keep his footing, and many noddings and bobbings of the head, the first gentleman in Europe tumbled heavily upon the carpet. Jocelyn's prompt impulse

was to rush to his aid and lift the fallen Prince: but at the same moment his Royal Highness threw up the contents of his stomach all over himself and the carpet—and Jocelyn, ineffably disgusted, turned away, rang the bell violently, and quitted the room.

On the following morning, Jocelyn called upon the Princess Sophia, with whom he remained in deep consultation for upwards of an hour; and on taking his leave he returned to the hotel in Covent Garden, where he was in the habit of taking up his quarters when in London. There he penned a long letter, which he addressed to Lady Sackville, and which he forthwith despatched to Carlton House. He then ordered a post-chaise, and by ten o'clock in the evening once more entered the ancient city of Canterbury.

CHAPTER CXVI.

MATRIMONIAL STORMS.

It was the morning after the scenes and entertainments just described; and if we penetrate into the breakfast-parlour at the Earl of Curzon's house, we shall find his lordship and Editha lounging at the table, sipping their chocolate, and carrying on a broken kind of discourse with listless tone and idle manner, partly real and partly assumed.

"And so last night, while we were returning home in the carriage," said the Earl of Curzon, "you intimated that I paid a little too much attention to Lady Prescott—"

"I did not make the remark, Charles," interrupted Editha, "before you said something sneering and sarcastic concerning Lord Sackville's attentions towards me."

"Well, I only said what I thought," resumed the nobleman, stretching out his arms and yawning. "Sackville is a deuced handsome fellow; and I told you that I thought he was smitten with you—that was all."

"No—it was *not* all," said Editha, extending herself with a still more languid abandonment upon the sofa, or lounge, whereon she was reclining—her symmetrical form loosely enveloped in an elegant morning wrapper; "for you even intimated that I received his lordship's attentions with an apparent willingness—"

"I don't think I used the word *willingness*," observed the Earl. "I said that

you might have shown him a little more coldness."

"No—*reserve* was the term, now that I recollect, interrupted the Countess "and I told you in reply that it is not in my nature to appear distant and reserved to any friend or acquaintance, unless it were to resent a marked insult."

"Yes—I recollect your saying all that," observed Lord Curzon; and I think I expressed my opinion that Lord Sackville's very conspicuous attentions were *not* received as an insult."

"Assuredly not," responded Editha, still maintaining a tone and look of listless indifference, although in reality she began to be piqued at the under-current of satire which perceptibly ran through her husband's discourse. Received as an insult, indeed! how could you have thought such a thing? Did Lady Prescott receive *your* attentions as an insult?"

"You asked me that question in the carriage last night," observed Lord Curzon.

"And you told me," said Editha, her lips now curling with a perceptible sneer, "there was not the slightest resemblance between the two cases."

"No more there is," ejaculated the Earl, beginning to get excited. "Lady Prescott is a widow, and may be permitted a certain license: she is not to be expected to enact the prude—"

"At all events your lordship seems to expect that she should not," interrupted Editha. "But it is ridiculous to suppose that *you*, on the one hand, and in the presence of your wife, may lavish your most tender assiduities—indeed, I may say amorous and truly significant attentions—upon a very beautiful widow,—while I, on the other hand, am to be called to an account for merely accepting the most ordinary courtesies."

"But you said all that on the chaise last night," cried the Earl.

"To be sure I did! But are we not recapitulating that very interesting and edifying discourse?" said Editha.

"But why recapitulate it?" demanded the Earl, impatiently.

"Most assuredly it was not I who commenced it," ejaculated the Countess, her cheeks flushing and her whole manner denoting a rising pettishness. "Let me tell you once for all, that I only behaved with common courtesy and politeness towards Lord Sackville. I gave him no encouragement whatsoever: I defy a single soul seated around that table, from the Prince down to—"

"The Prince indeed!" exclaimed Curzon with an ironical laugh. "He was as drunk as an owl—and looked very much like one too, lolling in that arm-chair—"

"Yes—Lady Sackville must have a singular taste," observed Editha, with a contemptuous toss of her head, arising from ill-concealed jealousy, "to allow such a loathsome monster—"

"Nonsense! you don't think so in your heart," said the Earl. "I dare say if the truth be known, you would give ten years of your life to change places with Lady Sackville and become the Prince's mistress."

"How dare you insult me, my lord, in this manner?" demanded Editha, but with a passion that was not so well affected as altogether to deceive her husband. "In fact, what cause have I given you to address me in the style which you adopted in the carriage last night and which you are renewing now? I repeat that I only received Lord Sackville's attention with a becoming courtesy; and when the company got heated with wine and began to indulge in certain little freedoms—innocent as your lordship doubtless considers them to have been," added Editha, with a fine vein of sarcasm in her accents, "Lord Sackville abstained from adopting the same course towards me; whereas you did not hesitate to kiss Lady Prescott—"

"'Twas a mere kiss snatched in fun," observed Curzon.

"Lips are not glued together in jest," rejoined Editha, her eyes flashing the spirit of the sarcasm which her words conveyed: "nor does the hand rest upon the naked shoulder unintentionally:—nor, when withdrawn, glide accidentally over the heaving bosom—"

"Ah!" ejaculated the Earl; "do you mean to tell me that all this took place between Lady Prescott and myself?"

"I mean to say that it took place from you towards Lady Prescott," replied Editha: "but I may add that her ladyship, ashamed at what thus took place, though perhaps in her heart not altogether unwilling, looked the prude and affected to be shocked. In plain terms—if I must repeat what I said to you in the carriage last night—your conduct was infamous and mine was irreproachable."

"And I tell you in return," exclaimed the Earl, now getting too angry to persevere in a tone and a manner of listless indifference, "that your conduct towards Sackville was not so innocent as you would have me believe. When he helped you to wine and you held your glass, I saw

hand rest upon your's with an amorous pressure that was perceptible enough to any one who understands these things—"

"Ah! your lordship is such a proficient," ejaculated Editha, with a taunting laugh.

"You shall say so before I have done," rejoined the Earl: "for if you did not kiss each other when in a moment of good humour kissing went all round the table, yet you sat so close to each other that I could see as well as possible his knee pressing against your's; and I have no doubt that *your* feet were talking mutely though eloquently enough to *his* under the table. I know you are as deep as a well, Editha—as perfound a hypocrite as every woman was; but nevertheless you could not last night altogether veil the real state of your feelings from me. I saw your bosom heave and fall with sensuous palpitations; I could even follow the occasional thrill of rapture which swept through your form, doubtless when in contact with the knee, the foot or the elbow of your companion;—I marked when he whispered some hurried word in your ear, and which little episode in the tender drama would have passed unnoticed, had not the rapid movement of *his* head been followed by the quick blush mounting to *your* cheeks;—and ever and anon too I caught the veiled look which your eyes flung sidelong upon the glowing countenance of Venetia's husband."

"I have listened silently, but I cannot say patiently, to this long tirade," commenced Editha, in a voice that was tremulous with conflicting emotions; "and I can only say that in return for your gratuitous accusations, your vile imaginings, and your wicked interpretations of the most innocent look and gestures, that you are a liar and a coward—"

"Liar!" ejaculated the Earl, his olive-tinted cheeks becoming red as a peony.

"Aye, liar!" echoed the Countess. "And it is not the first time that I have called you this name! You have accused me of forgeries—you have accused me of adulteries—"

"Yes—and they are all true!" thundered the Earl, now springing from his seat and dashing his hand violently upon the table.

"Coward—dastard! you had to apologise for those accusations," said Editha, her lips white and quivering with rage, and her eyes flashing as if pieces of jet could fling forth fire.

"There shall be an end put to all this," exclaimed the Earl. "I will have a divorce!"

"No—you shall *not*," ejaculated Editha, in a tone of defiance. I am not going to humour you thus far," she added bitterly. "Besides which, you are too sensitive about what you call your *honour*, to proclaim yourself a cuckold until you hold the proofs of my infidelity in your possession."

"Trust not to much too your own devilish hypocrisy," exclaimed the Earl: then with accents of bitter taunting, he added, "I dare say your sisters, your aunts, and your mother, all thought they were equally secure when playing their amatory tricks—"

Editha sprang up from the sofa like a flashing lightning shafts, her nostrils dilating, her lips apart quivering gaspingly and her whole person vibrating as it were with the rage of a panther. Like panther, too, did she appear ready to spring with her lithe and supple form upon her husband, who startled and terrified for the moment, stepped back a pace or two: then suddenly turning upon his heel, he burst into a forced laugh, exclaiming, "Admirably assumed," 'pon my honour! 'Tis as good as the play at Carlton House last night."

"Assumed!" said Editha, in a voice of stifling fury.

"Yes—assumed!" rejoined her husband. "You would do well for a tragedy queen: your rage is admirable!"

"Ah! you dared talk of a divorce just now," cried Editha; "but if there be a divorce between us, it shall be at *my* instigation against *you* for cruelty, ill-treatment, and adultery."

The Earl of Curzon indulged in another affected laugh, and then slowly sauntered forth from the breakfast-parlour. Proceeding to his own chamber, he dressed himself, and was about to take his morning's ride on horse back, when a footman announced that a young man was waiting to see him but that he had declined to give any name as he said he called upon his lordship by appointment. The Earl, wondering who it could be, immediately repaired to the room in which the visitor was waiting; and the moment he entered he recognised Theodore Varian.

"Ah! you were to have called upon me," explained the Earl. "It was ten days ago that I met you in Nicholas Lane and you promised me—"

"Yes, my lord—I promised to call, it is true," said Theodore; "but when I explain to your lordship the reasons

which have hitherto delayed me, I am certain to obtain your lordship's forgiveness."

"Speak, then, young man," said Curzon; "and let me hear what you have to say."

"When I met your lordship in the City, ten days ago," proceeded Theodore, "I was about to call on the villain Emmerson and overwhelm him with reproaches. I entered the office—I forced myself into the presence of that man who has been my mortal enemy. On beholding me he quailed: his iron nerves gave way; his rigid features relaxed—he was afraid! Oh! it was guilt trembling in the presence of outraged, persecuted innocence. Then did I overwhelm him with a torrent of invectives, or rather with a flood of reproaches. He was, of course, previously aware that I had received a full pardon; he knew therefore that I had found powerful friends—and doubtless he thought it more polite to conciliate me than to take the high tone and eject me from his office. He accordingly bade me sit down, and begged me to talk the matter calmly over with him. It instantaneously struck me that he meant not merely to make his peace with me, but to invite me to resume my situation in his employment. I accordingly affected to grow calmer: I sat down and listened to what he had to say. He began by declaring how sorry he was that he should have gone to such lengths against me, and expressed his readiness to make all possible amends for his harshness. I let him know that it was through the kindness of Sir Douglas Huntingdon I obtained my pardon: for that gentleman indeed was the author of it——

"Ah! Sir Douglas?" exclaimed Curzon. "He is an intimate friend of mine."

"And he is my benefactor," said Theodore. "However to make a long story short, my lord," he continued, "I must inform you that when Mr. Emmerson heard who was my influential patron he seemed more than ever contrite for his past behaviour, and said that if I considered his taking me back into his service would be the means of establishing a complete retrieval of my character, he would cheerfully allow me to return. In my own heart I at once resolved to accept this proposition, because I perceived the opportunity it would afford me for carrying-out an implacable vengeance: but I pretended to hesitate ere I accepted the offer, and indeed raised some difficulties.

But these, Mr. Emmerson speedily overruled; and we ended by renewing our engagement."

"But what on earth could have induced him to take you back?" demanded Curzon.

"Because he sees that I have obtained influential friends; and it is in the man's nature to court those who are thus situated; because also he wishes to have it trumpeted forth that he is a true Christian and can forgive those who have injured him: because, likewise," added Varian bitterly, "he knows that I possess a sister whose good looks have already excited his unhallowed passions. These are his motives for taking me back. The cold calculation of selfishness has prompted him to offer me my old situation: a ferocious thirst for revenge on my part has prompted me to accept of it!"

"And you have been with him ever since?" said the Earl, interested in the conversation because he not only owed Emmerson money, but the name of that individual was also mixed up in the affair of Colonel Malpas, Editha, and the forged bills—an affair which as the reader will recollect, was still involved in so much mystification for the Earl.

"In consequence of resuming my duties in the City," continued Varian, "I had to find a convenient residence; and the bounty of Sir Douglas Huntingdon has enabled me to take a neat little house and furnish it comfortably. My sister is installed there; and we are once more tolerably happy. But all these circumstances have so occupied me that I have not been able to call upon your lordship until now: and indeed I do not know that I should even have been able to find time to come to your lordship at all—at least for the present—had it not been for a certain circumstance——"

"And that circumstance?" said the Earl, with a sort of present anxiety.

"I dare say," observed Varian, with some little degree of hesitation, "that your lordship wonders why I should have made a confidant of you so readily in respect to the vengeance which I cherish against Emmerson—my resolve to wreak it and consequently my motives for resuming my employment in his office."

"Well, it does seem strange that you should have spoken so very, very frankly," remarked the Earl: "but perhaps you will explain yourself."

"I will, my lord," said Varian. "As a matter of course, your lordship can understand me well when I tell you that the

man who is pursuing another with unrelenting rancour, seeks every opportunity to inflict the cherished vengeance. He will listen at doors—peep through key-holes—search amongst papers—prey into letters—”

“Ah! I do indeed understand you,” said the Earl, with a growing presentiment that he was about to hear something relative to himself. “You have done all this?—you have made some discoveries of an important nature?”

“Yes, my lord:” and Theodore looked steadily but significantly in the nobleman’s face.

“Ah! I understand you,” said Curzon trembling with anxiety and suspense. “You have made some discovery that regards me?”

“I have my lord. But—” and Theodore hesitated.

“You fear that it will be disagreeable?” said the Earl with quivering lip.

“Disagreeable! it will be worse, my lord—for unless you have any previous suspicion, it will be positively startling—perhaps overwhelming.”

“Speak, Mr. Varian—speak for God’s sake, speak!” said the Earl in a hoarse voice; and leaning forward on his seat, he looked Varian earnestly and searchingly in the face.

“But it will be terrible,—very terrible, my lord——”

“Speak, I say—speak, I conjure you! Only be sure that you tell me the truth and whatever you tell me, you prove.”

“Then listen, my lord,” resumed Varian: and after gazing slowly round the room, as if to assure himself that there was no place where anybody might be concealed, he said, “Prepare yourself, my lord, to hear something about her Ladyship—your Countess——”

“Ah! ’tis as I thought,” ejaculated the Earl, but in the subdued tone of caution. “I was not altogether unprepared for this announcement. Go on—you see that I am no longer excited—fear not to speak, What discoveries have you made?—what proofs have you obtained?”

“Happening to glance, my lord, over Emmerson’s cheque book,” continued Theodore, “I was struck by observing on the counterfoil the name of Lady Curzon for several sums of considerable amount——”

“Ah! she has had much money lately,” exclaimed the Earl, the mystery now suddenly being cleared up; but she told me she had it from her sisters. Go on—what next?”

“Considering that this was somewhat strange, inasmuch as I knew that your lordship had also obtained loans from Mr. Emmerson, my curiosity was piqued and on minutely examining the contents of a private drawer in Emmerson’s desk, which I opened by a skeleton key—for you perceive my lord, that I am systematic, persevering, and methodical in following up my vengeance——”

“Yes, yes,” said the Earl, impatiently. “But what found you in the secret drawer?”

“A letter, my lord, from Lady Curzon to Mr. Emmerson,” answered Theodore: “a letter the contents of which leave no doubt as to——”

“Go on, go on: you hesitate?”

“Oh! it is natural to hesitate when about to assure a husband of his wife’s infamy. And now, my lord,” added Varian, “I cannot speak more plainly.”

“Heavens! then I am indeed dishonoured,” said the Earl, in a deep and ominous voice, his cheek blanched, his brows became corrugated and his hands clenched involuntarily. “But that letter—what said it?—where is it?—have you brought it?” “No I have not, my lord,” replied Varian. “I dared not abstract it: for if it were missed, the whole current of Mr. Emmerson’s suspicions would be turned upon me. But that the contents of that letters are damnable enough, your lordship may judge when I tell you that allusion is made therein to the meetings of the Countess and Mr. Emmerson at an infamous house in Soho Square.”

“Mrs. Gale’s! I know it well” exclaimed the Earl. But is it possible that my wife has abandoned herself to that grovelling muck-worm—that base-born money-grubber?”

“It is possible—it is true, my lord,” returned Theodore impressively. But the reason that I have come to you this morning is connected with this matter; and as Mr. Emmerson fortunately sent me to the West End, I have found this opportunity,——”

What else have you to communicate?” demanded the Earl. “Of course the business cannot rest here. Not for a day—not for an hour—scarcely even for a minute can I restrain my fury!”

“Patience, my lord,” interrupted Varian, “and listen to me. Ere I quitted the office just now—that is to say at about half-past ten o’clock—Emmerson sent out several letters by the boy to the twopenny-post. I seized the opportunity of glancing over the addresses, and saw that one was

directed to her ladyship the Countess of Curzon——"

"Ah!" ejaculated the Earl: "then may I obtain a proof of her frailty. You say the letter was posted an hour back?"

"Yes, my lord: and therefore in about a couple of hours more it will be delivered at this house. Can you not intercept it? can you not obtain it from the post man?"

"I will wait for him in the street," said the Earl.

"And if," hastily resumed Theodore, "it should prove to be a letter which, after reading, you should wish still to reach the hands of her ladyship, your lordship can re-seal it: for here is a piece of Emmerson's own sealing wax, and here is a bread seal with his crest upon it. Ah my lord," added Varian, as he handed Curzon the wax and the seal "you perceive that I have neglected no detail—however minute, however insignificant—in following out my vengeance."

"But in what way, Mr. Varian can I reward you for giving me this information?" asked the Earl.

"By crushing the scoundrel Emmerson" responded Theodore with a look of diabolical ferocity, "by overwhelming the miscreant so soon as he is placed in your power! Cover him with infamy—unmask him as a vile seducer and infamous adulterer—prosecute him in the law-courts—obtain damages against him—show him no mercy—seize his goods, seize his person—plunge him into gaol—aye, and keep him there till he rots—till he rots—and dies—dies miserably!"

The emphasis with which Theodore Varian gave utterance to these words, with an increasing power of accentuation as he proceeded, conveyed even a more forcible idea than did his ferocious looks, of that diabolic thirst for vengeance which wrung his soul as with a strong continuous agony. Even the Earl of Curzon, who was himself prepared for the consummation of a fearful revenge, gazed with mingled awe and terror upon that young man whose handsome person suddenly became hideous in feature and quivering in every limb as if shaken by the convulsive throes of some devil that had entered into him.

"Yes," said the nobleman, recovering himself, and even catching the infection of Theodore's utter implacability; "my vengeance shall be terrible. But if it be necessary to obtain that letter which you saw in Emmerson's desk——"

"Then you shall have it," returned Varian, "and anything else you require

and that I can do for you shall be done—provided you promise me that the miscreant Emmerson shall receive at your hands, no more mercy than Satan will bestow upon the soul which he has purchased as his own."

"Stay one moment," said the Earl as Varian was hurrying to the door. "You promise to serve me upon one condition—and that condition I solemnly undertake to fulfil. But let us join our vengeance—let us unite our forces, so as to strike whomsoever and wheresoever retribution ought to be inflicted."

"Be it so, my lord—be it so!" exclaimed Varian, labouring under a strong excitement. "It is a compact: we will make common cause together:—and so long as utter, immitigable ruin—consummate destruction—shall overtake that monster Emmerson—the man who has deprived me of my good name—who has made me hate myself—who has stamped me with the infamy of Newgate—and who, more than all *that*, sought to ruin my poor sister and to make me, her brother, the author of that crowning turpitude,—so long, I say, as utter ruin shall overtake this man, I am content! Speak then, my lord," added Theodore, in a more collected tone; "and tell me what else you have in view."

"Young man," said the Earl of Curzon clutching Theodore forcibly by the arm, and holding it tight and serried as if in an iron vice; "you know what wrongs are, for you have experienced them—you know what a sense of dishonour is, for you smart under it—you know what a thirst for vengeance is, because your own is insatiable. Conceive, then, what must be my feelings towards any and all who have had a share in dishonouring me! My wife is a party to that dishonour—the authoress of it—the accomplice—the one, in fact, through whom the blow is struck. She then must be punished! Emmerson is another. But there is still another——"

"Another, my lord! Whom mean you?" asked Theodore.

"Search you, my young friend, amongst your master's papers," responded the Earl; and ascertain if you can, whether the name of Colonel Malpas in any way transpires in connexion with my wife——"

"Ah! now I remember!" ejaculated Varian, a thought striking him. "The letter of the Countess to Mr. Emmerson alludes to certain bills which she had given to Colonel Malpas, and which she acknowledges to have received back again by private messenger from Mr. Emmerson."

"Then the plot is all unravelling itself," said the Earl, rubbing his hands with a demoniac glee. The plausible smooth-faced rascal—to invent so fine a story about those bills! When I called upon him the other day in the City, he actually staggered me for the moment. But he must be as consummate a dissembler as my wife is a finished hypocrite. However," exclaimed the Earl, suddenly abandoning that musing tone: "'tis for you to procure the letter for me when the time comes—or any other documentary evidence you can obtain—in order to bring the case home to Malpas as well as to Emmerson; so that I may not only avenge myself on my wife's paramours, but heap infamy upon infamy on the head of that guilty woman herself!"

"I will serve you to the utmost of my power, my lord," said Varian: and he then took his leave of the Earl of Curzon.

CHAPTER CXVII.

THE APPOINTMENT.

We must now return to Editha, whom we left in the breakfast-parlour after that scene of altercation and strife which she had with her husband. She remained alone for upwards of half an hour, pondering upon all that had just taken place, and likewise bestowing some of her mind's attention on the seductive qualifications of Lord Sackville. Presently her reverie was interrupted by the entrance of her faithful dependant—the handsome, courageous and mischievous-looking Gertrude who came to inquire whether her mistress had any commands to give her relative to her toilette.

"No—not at present my dear girl," answered Editha, who always treated her abigail in an affectionate manner when they were alone together. "I have had a frightful scene with the Earl just now. All his old suspicions are revived, and new ones have sprung up. He has threatened me with divorce—exposure—and heaven knows what: but all these heroics I care nothing for, because I am well assured that he will never take any step until he has the fullest proofs, in his possession—and those proofs, Gertrude," she added with a laugh, "he never shall obtain!"

"And your ladyship says," observed the abigail, "that his lordship has conceived new suspicions? Surely your ladyship has not—"

"Embarked in a new amour—eh?" said Editha, laughing still merrily than before. "But indeed I *have* my dear Gertrude. No harm is done as yet, however: but I cannot say how soon there will be. 'Tis Lord Sackville—and you must admit that he is a very handsome man."

"Yes—I have seen him here once or twice when he was plain Mr. Sackville. But for heaven's sake take care, my lady, since the Earl's suspicion are aroused."

"Oh! be not afraid! I will take care," observed Editha. But to speak frankly, it is somewhat unfortunate that the Earl should have conceived these suspicions this morning; for to tell you the truth Lord Sackville last night requested permission to write to me, and in yielding assent I charged him to be sure and send his letter by the post—not by private hand—and to send it so that I might receive it about one or two this afternoon. Now, if the Earl should take it into his head to intercept my letters—"

"Oh! if that is all your ladyship apprehends," exclaimed the ready-witted Gertrude, "we will manage that: for I will myself go and watch for the postman presently at the end of the street."

"Do so, my dear girl—for that is what I call making sure doubly sure."

We need not however dwell any longer upon this dialogue which took place between the profligate Editha and her crafty maid. Suffice it to say that a couple of hours later Gertrude issued forth and proceeded up the street to watch for the postman. In a short time she beheld him advancing from Bond Street; but just as she was hurrying towards him, what was her dismay on beholding the Earl of Curzon himself hurry past her and stop the letter-carrier!

That her master had not recognised her was her first impression. At all events, even if he had, he took no notice of her; and as she was of course anxious to avoid being seen loitering about in the street, she retreated to a little distance, though still watching what took place between his lordship and the postman, and now her heart sank within her as she beheld the letter-carrier place several missives in the hands of the nobleman: and he, immediately on receiving them, turned back and retraced his steps towards the mansion. Gertrude, evidently unperceived by the Earl, sped across the street and turned a little way up a stable yard so as to avoid him: then watching until he entered the house, she hastened in pursuit of the post-

man, who was delivering correspondence from door to door.

"Have you any letters for Lord Curzon?" she inquired; and with all her spirited effrontery, she was unable to subdue the blush that conscious duplicity sent up to her cheeks.

"There were several letters for Curzon House, Miss," answered the postman: "but the Earl himself just met me and took them."

"Were there any for her ladyship?" asked Gertrude, scarcely liking to put the question.

"Yes—there were two," was the response: and away sped the postman giving his sharp doubleknocks and delivering his correspondence along the street.

With a tightening sensation at the heart—for she completely indentified herself with the affairs of her mistress—did Gertrude hurry back into the mansion: and great was the consternation which Editha experienced on learning how her husband had waylaid the postman and intercepted the letters. A quarter of an hour elapsed in hurried anxious, and bewildered discourse between Lady Curzon and her faithful abigail—both dreading lest an explosion should be imminent, and each suggesting a dozen different plans for meeting any emergencies or contingencies that might arise. But at the expiration of that interval, which though so brief was nevertheless full of painful apprehensions, a footman entered the parlour—handed two letters to her ladyship upon a silver tray—and then quitted the room again.

"Two letters?" hastily observed the lady's maid the moment the door closed behind the footman: "and the Earl has doubtless read them both! But are the seals broken?"

"No," returned Editha carefully scrutinizing the letters ere she opened them. "Here is one from Emmerson: it is his crest upon the seal. But what a quantity of wax he has used! These City people are so ungenteel in many things! But, Ah! this other letter is from Lord Sackville. I do not know his writing; but I know the arms he has assumed since he was raised to the peerage. Ah!" suddenly ejaculated Editha, in an altered tone: "this letter has been opened! See—here is the place where the wax has been broken and then refastened. 'Tis cleverly done, no doubt but my eyes are sharp as needles—"

"Yes—'tis clear enough, my lady," said Gertrude: "that letter which you say comes from Lord Sackville, has been most

certainly opened. And perhaps," she immediately added as a thought struck her "the other one has been opened too and resealed, which may be the reason why there's so much wax."

"Well, of course, if the Earl intercepted the letters it was for the purpose of opening them," said Editha, in a musing tone, "and if, having resealed them, he has allowed them to reach my hands, it is that through their means I may be drawn into some snare which will place me entirely in his power. We shall see! And now for the reading of the letters. We will take Emmerson's first, as it may be upon business—whereas I know that Sackville's is about love."

The Countess of Curzon accordingly proceeded to break open the money-broker's letter, the contents of which ran as follow:—

"Nicholas Lane, December 11, 1814.

"I write to you, my dear Editha, because it is absolutely necessary that I should see you, in consequences of a certain communication I have received from that scoundrel Malpas, who having tried all kinds of subterfuges to get out of the King's Bench, has now with characteristic villany hit upon a scheme which he has imparted to me and which is more or less alarming. For heaven's sake, then, give me an appointment at your earliest convenience—not only for the reason just mentioned, but also that I may enjoy the ineffable bliss of clasping you, my sweet Editha, once more in my arms. I anxiously await your response. Oh! delay it not. I live only for you, my dear Editha. By the bye, how get you on with the Earl? are all his suspicions completely lulled? I hope so. But you shall reassure me on this point when we meet. Pray, therefore, give me an early appointment, either at Lady L——'s or at Mrs. G——'s.

"Yours ever sincerely and affectionately."

"THOMAS EMMERSON."

"Heavens!" ejaculated Editha, pale and trembling with alarm: if the Earl has really perused this letter—if he has actually opened it—"

"These can be no doubt of it, my lady" interrupted Gertrude: "and therefore let us consider it granted that he has opened it. But as a proof of your intimacy with Mr. Emmerson, it is fortunately in your ladyship's hands and not in your husband's."

"True!" observed Editha; then tossing the letter into the fire, she said, "Thus perish the proof. And now for Sackville's communication."

With these words, Editha opened the second letter, the contents of which were couched in the ensuing terms.—

Carlton House, December 11.

"Language has no power to express the elysian bliss—the celestial happiness—that I experienced, beloved Editha, in your company last night. Methought you never looked so beautiful! It was rapture to gaze upon you: the pressure of your hand sent an electric flood of ecstasy thrilling through me. Your glorious eyes poured their ardour into the depths of my soul; and your smiles—Oh! it was an ineffable bliss to behold them—or rather to feel them beaming upon me. My wife is handsome—grandly handsome—every body will admit: but ten thousand times, my beloved Editha, do I prefer your oriental style of loveliness! It was the happiest moment of my life when for the first time, the other night at my aunt's Miss Bathursts house, you looked back the language of love in return for the avowal of passion which I was daring and adventurous enough to make. But last night, as I have declared above, rendered me supremely happy. I sate next to you at the dinner-table—I kept by your side in the Green Room—again I sate next to you at supper and every time we seized opportunity to press each other's hands I felt immersed in a fount of rapture. Your husband could surmise nothing, because we were so circumspect; and as for my wife, she has no jealousy. Nothing, therefore, need mar the progress of our love. Though secret, it shall not be the less fervid; though veiled and hidden, it shall not be the less impassioned and enthusiastic. You gave me permission to write to you—to commit my thoughts and my desires to paper—and I hasten to avail myself of that permission. This I do, not only for the pleasure of thus communing as it were with you, but likewise because I have bethought myself of an opportunity for us to meet to-night again, and indulge in unrestrained discourse. Strange that I did not last night recollect that Lady Wenlock's long-announced masked ball was so near at hand! Of course you have received an invitation? All the world of fashion will be there. Shall we not, then, avail ourselves of that golden opportunity for meeting—conversing—and perhaps passing two or three hours in each other's company?

"I know, my dear Editha, that you will at once yield an affirmative to all I have just asked. I therefore take it for granted that you will be at Lady Wenlock's to-night, I will be there punctually at nine o'clock. My costume shall be that of a Cavalier of the olden time, with doublet, buskins, cap, and every article of apparel in the most approved style. Ringlets of false hair will flow upon my shoulders and as a matter of course I shall wear a mask. Do you think you will recognise me in this costume? You can scarcely fail to do so. But as I shall not know how you may be dressed, the usual etiquette must be reversed, and you will have to accost and single out *me* from the midst of the throng. Your watchword shall be—'*How comes it, Cavalier, that you have left your sword behind you?*'—and if the reply be, '*Because I expected the companionship of a gentle lady,*' then shall you know that it is really I—your adoring admirer—to whom you will be speaking. Farewell, then until nine to-night!

"Your fond and devoted,
"SACKVILLE."

"A beautiful composition! quite a love of a love-letter! the sweetest of the sweet!" exclaimed Gertrude, with a sincere and most unfeigned admiration of the rhapsody.

"Yes—and a pleasant letter for a husband to have read," said Editha curtly. "But thank heaven! he has allowed it to reach my hands, and has not kept it as a proof against me. Now, Gertrude, let us consult what is to be done. Do you think that the Earl means to inveigle me into some snare? Would he have allowed this letter to reach me if he did not purpose to make some use of its contents in order to ruin me?"

"Depend upon it, my lady," rejoined Gertrude, "that the Earl will devise some means—perhaps forge a letter, as if coming from you—to prevent Lord Sackville from personating the character of a Cavalier at all; but the Earl himself will go disguised as a Cavalier so as to personate Lord Sackville—inveigle you into avowals and confessions of love—and then unmask himself to overwhelm you with confusion."

"Your surmises are admirable, Gertrude," said Editha. "There can be no doubt that you have hit exactly upon the expedient to which my cunning and crafty husband purpose to have recourse. But we will outwit him! Ah! I have it," she ejaculated, as a thought struck her. "Capital! capital! we will turn the tabl

completely upon the Earl. Talk of forgeries! I will see if I cannot forge a note from him to a certain person. Give me my desk, Gertrude."

The writing-materials being placed upon the table, the Countess proceeded to open a letter which she indited with great care, disguising her own hand to the utmost of her power, and imitating that of her husband with great effect: for be it remembered that this was not the first time she had practised a little in this way. When that letter was finished, she hastened to open another: but this latter was in her own undisguised handwriting, inasmuch as it was addressed to Lord Sackville, and ran as follows:—

Curzon House, Dec. 11. 3 p.m.

"Thanks for your letter, my dear Horace. I will be at Lady Wenlock's to-night. But on no account go dressed in the way you have described in your letter. Adopt some plain and unassuming garb; and at half-past eight o'clock be in the conservatory opening from Lady Wenlock's drawing-room. You know it? I shall be there; and shall bring Gertrude with me as a companion—because the circumstances are peculiar, as I will explain. You may recognise me by my dress, an accurate description of which I now give you.

* * * * *

"Yours affectionately,
"EDITHA."

Where the stars appear in Lady Curzon's letter, was given the description of the costume, but which there is no necessity to inflict upon our readers. Suffice it to say that the two letters being duly addressed and sealed,—the one in the feigned hand to a certain person, and the other in Editha's usual hand to Lord Sackville—Gertrude undertook to deliver them in person, so as to prevent the possibility of mistakes—and she sallied forth accordingly.

As for Emerson's letter and the important matter to which he had alluded therein, Editha was compelled to postpone any notice of the same until the morrow, she having quite enough on her hands to occupy herself for the rest of the eventful day of which we are writing.

CHAPTER CXVIII.

THE MASKED BALL.

THE reader will recollect that in the early part of this narrative we introduced him to the residence of Lady Wenlock in the neighbourhood of Kew. On that occasion this kind-hearted, hospitable, and wealthy widow gave an autumnal fete at her mansion, which stood in the midst of spacious pleasure grounds: and it was there that the memorable scene took place between Venetia and Colonel Malpas. But some months had elapsed since then; and the hand of winter was now upon the scene. True was it that the shrubberies formed of evergreens, resisted the frost, the icechill, and the snow of the borean season, and presented their long patches of verdure to the eye. But the shady avenues of summer were now naught save a bleak net-work of skeleton boughs; and the delicious arbours of roses, jessamine, and clematis had lost their verdure and their floral embellishments, and were shrivelled to a scant interlacement of bare tendrils.

But if nature were cold and cheerless without, all was brilliancy and warmth with the vast and gilded saloons of Lady Wenlock's mansion. By eight o'clock the almost countless carriages had set down a numerous and gay company—lords and titled dames, gentlemen and ladies—old and young—many clad in fancy costumes, and still more wearing masks. The effect was dazzling in the extreme,—the dresses exhibiting all the variations of elegance, gorgeousness, and magnificence, and making the saloons resemble parterres of flowers with their infinite minglings and blendings of hue and their illimitable diversification of gaudy splendours.

But we do not intend to dwell upon the description of scene which our readers can doubtless picture for themselves. We will therefore simply observe that the utmost gaiety and good humour seemed to prevail—the masks fulfilled their assumed characters to general satisfaction—the splendid band that was in attendance poured forth its glorious strains through saloons which were flooded with lustre—rich perfumes loaded the air—and in the apartments where dancing took place, this amusement was sustained with a more than ordinary spirit.

It was about half-past eight o'clock when two elegantly-dressed females, wearing masks upon their countenances, entered

the conservatory which open from the drawing-room. These were Editha and Gertrude. The reader may think it strange that a highborn countess should take her obscure abigail with her to such a scene: but be it remembered in the first place that Editha was very fond of Gertrude—in the second place that Gertrude was deeply interested in certain proceedings then going on, and most anxious to witness their results—and thirdly that Gertrude possessed a shape of perfect symmetry and was altogether a very genteel and indeed superior girl, so that when elegantly dressed, with gloved hands and her mischievous lady's-maid looking face more than half concealed by a black mask, she had every appearance of one quite in her place and feeling perfectly at home amidst the brilliant throng at Lady Wenlock's house.

There was nobody else in the conservatory at the moment when Editha and Gertrude entered it. The atmosphere was warm and perfumed with the fragrance of hot-house flowers. Orange trees, limes and several plants from the tropics spread their bright foliage and displayed their green or golden fruit, thus cheating the imagination with the belief that summer reigned within those walls of glass, though winter was chill, and hoar, and icy without.

How well we managed to issue forth from the mansion without being observed by the Earl," said Editha to Gertrude.

"Yes, my lady," was the response. "His lordship had not left when we came away; but I have no doubt he means to come. Indeed, I am certain that by the frequent goings and comings of his confidential valet all the afternoon, preparations were being made for his lordship to appear to-night in a fancy costume."

Oh! if your stratagem should succeed thoroughly," whispered Editha, "how amusing, how exquisite it will be! By the bye, when we left the house just now and entered the carriage, even if the Earl were peeping, he could not have seen how we were dressed, as we were both enveloped in those great thick cloaks and had the black veils thrown over our heads."

"Must he not have wondered," asked Gertrude, "supposing that he *did* see us go out, who on earth your ladyship was taking with you? Or do you suppose he would suspect that your companion was none other than myself?"

"No," responded Editha. "If he saw us at all and thought anything upon the

subject, he would suppose that I had invited some female friend of mine to accompany me. But hush! hither comes a masque exactly of Lord Sackville's height, symmetry, and gait."

As the Countess spoke these words, a gentleman wearing a mask entered the conservatory; and instantaneously accosting Editha, he whispered, "Dearest lady, I recognise you by your costume:" and slightly raising his mask, he disclosed the features of Lord Sackville.

"Let us step aside, Horace, for a moment," said Editha: and taking his arm, she continued to observe in a low and tender tone, "I am delighted to meet you again."

"And I, Editha—what must be my feelings?" murmured Sackville, who was over head and ears in love with the beautiful but profligate patrician lady: and through the holes in their masks their eyes flashed mingled love, tenderness and desire.

They had passed farther into the conservatory, accompanied by Gertrude, who walked by the side of her mistress; and when reaching the corner most remote from the drawing-room door, they stood for a few minutes to converse in rapid whispers.

"Tell me all that has transpired," said Lord Sackville; "and to what circumstances you alluded in your note! For about the same time it arrived, I did receive *another* intimation warning me as to this night's costume: though indirectly intended to excite my fears, it nevertheless," only stirred up my curiosity."

"I have every reason to believe," answered Editha, quickly, "that the Earl intercepted your letter—read it—re-sealed it—and then allowed it to reach my hands just as if it had never been tampered with at all. Therefore, believing that the Earl had thus become aware of the appointment which you gave me for to-night, and that he would assume *your* character to ensnare me——"

"Ah! then this explains the mysterious billet which I received:" and as Lord Sackville uttered these words, he drew forth a note which he handed to Editha, who hastily scanned its contents, Gertrude peeping over her shoulder.

It ran as follows:—

"Take warning! You propose to be at the Masked Ball to-night at Lady Wenlock's; but a plot to assassinate you is on foot; and therefore prudence suggest that you should remain away, or at all events

adopt some costume quite different from that which you originally proposed to wear.

"A FRIEND."

"Yes—'tis clear enough," whispered Gertrude to her mistress, in an exulting tone: "the Earl's object was to keep his lordship"—alluding to Lord Sackville—"away from here this night. But the Earl is signally defeated already—and will be completely humbled!"

"Yes—provided the *other person* comes," added Editha: and she then explained to Lord Sackville the stratagem she had devised to expose her husband and turn the tables completely upon him. "And now," she added, when the hurried details were over, "let us return amongst the masked throng and ascertain whether the delectable Earl has as yet made his appearance."

In the meantime the Earl of Curzon *had* arrived at the mansion, apparelled in the fancy costume of a Cavalier of the old time. He wore a doublet—busking—a cap of a Greek shape—and a belt: and he had not omitted the long hair hanging down upon his shoulders. The reader need scarcely be informed that it was *his* hand which had penned the fictitious warning to Lord Sackville, whom he had indeed come thither to personate in the hope of meeting his wife and drawing her into such a conversation as would place her completely in his power.

On entering the brilliantly lighted saloons, he mingled amongst the throng of masques, in the anxious expectation of being accosted by Editha, but still wondering somewhat whether she would be there at all.

"It was about three o'clock in the afternoon that Sackville had my anonymous note," thought the Earl within himself; "and since then the interval has been too short for him to convey an intimation to Editha either that he will not be here to-night or that he will come in some other garb than that indicated in his letter. I have watched all the comings-in and goings out at home in Grosvenor Street this afternoon and evening; and no more letters have arrived—no lacquey from Carlton House has called with either note or message. 'Tis true that the minx Gertrude went out in the afternoon almost immediately after Editha, received the two letters; but it could not have been to make any fresh arrangement with Lord Sackville, because he himself only received my warning at about the same time and

could not therefore in any way have communicated a change of plan to Editha. That all goes well, then, I may suppose. Besides, Editha and her precious maid went out together ere now in the carriage, both cloaked and veiled. Doubtless my wife has brought her abigail with her to see the beauties and mingle in the intrigues of a masked ball! But if so, what an insult to Lady Wenlock and all these noble ladies, to introduce an obscure serving-wench hither! 'Tis clear, even if I entertained any doubt before, that Editha is entirely in Gertrude's power; and she propitiates the artful girl by bringing her to such a scene as this. Oh! it is high time that the progress of such intrigues should be stopped!"

Such were the musings of the Earl of Curzon during the first quarter of an hour that he sauntered through the saloons of Lady Wenlock's mansion. Every now and then his eyes were fixed upon some beautiful form whose symmetry resembled that of his wife: and then he scrutinisingly looked to ascertain if the hair of the masked lady possessed that same rich gloss and purple hue which characterised the tresses of Editha: but even when he felt most assured that he recognised his wife in some exquisitely-dressed masque who passed him by, he soon found that he was mistaken, as none of all these accosted him with the watch words pointed out in Sackville's letter.

He passed into the dancing-rooms—he proceeded along the brilliantly-lighted passages—he lounged on the superbly-decorated landings—and still no lady accosted him. Half-an-hour had now elapsed, and he began to think that his plot had failed and that Editha would not come. In the depths of his soul he breathed as it were imprecations of annoyance and disappointment, and once more did he retrace his way to the principal drawing-room where the throng of masques was thickest. Scarcely had he entered this magnificent saloon, when a hand was laid gently upon his arm, and stopping short he found himself accosted by a lady, elegantly dressed in ball costume, but with her countenance concealed by a thick veil instead of a mask. Glossy ringlets of purple blackness peeped forth from beneath the thick folds of the veil; and as much as the eye could observe of the bare shoulders and arms, seemed of that same rich olive-tinted complexion which characterised the warm and impassioned Editha. That it was his own wife who now accosted him, the Earl of Curzon felt convinced at the very first glance;

and a thrill of almost diabolic exultation penetrated to his heart as the pass-words were whisperingly murmured in his ears.

"*Cavalier*," said the veiled one, "*how is it that you have left your sword behind you?*"

"*Because*," was Curzon's prompt reply—and he also spoke whisperingly, so that there might be the less chance of the voice being recognised as his own instead of Lord Sackville's: "*because I expect to meet a gentle lady here to-night*"; and that this expectation is now fulfilled, I have reason to congratulate myself."

Thus speaking he took the veiled lady's hand, pressed it tenderly, and then drew it within his arm—not having the slightest doubt but that it was Editha who had thus become his companion, and towards whom he was practising so much deeply-planned dissimulation.

"How charming did you seem last night," he continued to whisper, in that low murmuring tone which suits as it were any male voice when giving utterance to the insidious language of sensuous passion. "It was happiness ineffable to be seated near you—to be permitted to gaze with ill-concealed admiration upon your charms—to catch the sunlight of your smiles and the beams of the glory that flashed from your lustrous eyes—"

"Oh!" lord responded the veiled one likewise in a low tremulous whisper "are you overwhelming me with compliments and flatteries!"

"Flatteries!" repeated Curzon totally unable to distinguish in the voice of his companion any peculiarity of accent to show that it was not the voice of Editha: "in the first place, I never flatter—and in the second place, even if I did, it would be impossible to adopt such a course with you. Because no language could be too exaggerated to express the power of your charms—those charms which have made me your slave!"

"But surely, surely," murmured the lady, "you cannot have conceived for me a passion so fervid—so intense—"

"Tell me, dearest, dearest lady," whispered Curzon, as he slowly led his veiled companion amidst the maze of the masked throng—"tell me whether it be the first time that any one has ventured to address you in this language since you were first wooed by him who gained possession of your hand?"

"Oh! would you believe me, my lord," answered the lady, in the soft tremulous tone which beauty adopts when bashfully confessing the homage that it receives;

"would you believe me, my lord, if I were to declare that such language has never been addressed to me before?"

"No, dearest lady," answered Curzon; "I assuredly should doubt your sincerity—because, lovely as you are, brilliant and fascinating as you are, it would be impossible that you could have escaped the thousand adulations—the myriad flatteries—yes, and the innumerable proofs of devotion and love—which constitute the triumph of all the stars that shine in the galaxy of beauty. But, Oh! think me not too venturous, dear lady, if I ask whether any of those adulations have made an impression on your heart—whether, in a word, you have ever had a lover besides your husband?"

"I never loved but two persons," said the veiled one, murmuringly. "My husband was one—"

"And the other?" said Curzon inquiringly, and speaking with the bated breath of an assumed suspense: for of course he was personating *Lord Sackville* towards one whom he believed to be *Editha*.

"That other?" responded the lady: then after a few moments' hesitation, she whispered: "That other—is yourself!"

"Oh! if I could be assured of this, how happy—how supremely happy should I feel!" said Curzon: but in the depth of his soul he silently exclaimed, "Vile, perfidious Editha?"

"Do you not believe me then?—do you suppose that I am telling you an untruth?" and as the veiled lady thus spoke, she pressed the Earl's arm with a kind of convincing tenderness. "If I did not love you, I should take your very mistrust of me an insult."

"Insult! No—heaven is my witness that I could not possibly insult you!"—and Curzon affected an exceeding fervour of tone, although still speaking low and murmuringly.

"And yet the words you uttered ere now would almost have implied the belief," rejoined the veiled lady, "that there has been levity in my conduct that I have given the world reason to speak lightly of me: whereas I solemnly declare that never, never was I faithless to my duties as a wife—never, never have I lost sight of the self-respect belonging to my position in society."

"That is to say," she added, in a scarcely audible tone of tender tremulousness, "until I last night received from you those attentions which made so deep an impression upon my soul!"

"Pardon me, dear lady," said the Earl, "if I continue the discourse for a few moments upon this topic. But as you have given me your love, I wish to be assured that it is a love in which only one other—and that *other* your husband—has ever shared."

"It is so—it is so," said the veiled one; "solemnly *do* I declare it! What possible reason can you have for supposing the contrary? Has the world ever dared to make free with my name?—has the breath of scandal ever been raised against me? If, so, tell me—that I may justify myself, or explain away any circumstance to which in some unguarded moment my conduct may have imparted an air of levity."

"And you will not be angry with me if I tell you what the world says?" whispered Curzon, earnestly.

"I will not—I will not," was the soft and musical response. "Tell me—what says the world of me?"

"In the first place, dear lady," proceeded Curzon, "it has coupled the name of Colonel Malpas with yours—"

"Colonel Malpas!" said the veiled one, with a sudden start which made Curzon feel more than ever convinced that all his suspicions in that quarter were really true, and that Malpas had been his wife's paramour.

"Yes," he said: "the world declares that the Colonel has been your lover."

"Then the world is guilty of the foulest calumny," returned the veiled lady: "for I do not even know Colonel Malpas to speak to."

"Not know him?" ejaculated the Earl inwardly cursing what he supposed to be Editha's astounding effrontery; but instantly mastering his excitement, he said, "Then the world has indeed done you much wrong: and perhaps it was equally guilty of as foul a calumny, when it whispered abroad that you had formed a new intimacy—with a certain stock-broker, money-lender, or whatever he is—of the name of Emmerson."

"My lord, you must positively be dreaming," said the veiled lady, partially withdrawing her hand from Curzon's arm. "But I cannot believe that you are intending a premeditated insult, to which however the bare iteration of such a calumny almost amounts, when I affirm—solemnly, sacredly affirm—that I never even heard of the name of Emmerson in my life!"

"Then again has the world wronged you most cruelly," said Curzon. But enough upon this topic. Tell me, sweet lady—did

your husband notice my attentions to you last night?"

An ejaculation of dismay burst from the lips of the veiled lady as this question fell upon her ears.

But we must pause for a moment to observe that while the preceding dialogue was taking place, Curzon and his companion had issued from the drawing-room and come forth upon the landing, where they had paused to pursue their discourse: they had then slowly and loungingly descended the great marble staircase, at the foot of which the lady stopped suddenly short, and disengaged herself from Curzon's arm as he put that question which we have last recorded.

"Wretched, woman!" he instantaneously said; "you begin to suspect now that something is wrong and that I am not really he whom I have pretended to be! You fancied that you were conversing with *another*—with Lord Sackville? But behold—and the Earl of Curzon took off the mask from his face.

By a sudden and impulsive movement, his companion threw back her veil in startled dismay, and disclosed to the astounded Earl of Curzon the features of Lady Prescott!

"Perdition! there is some mistake!" he said, grasping her by the arm. "But for heaven's sake compose yourself," he added, perceiving the mingled astonishment and terror into which his strange conduct had thrown her.

There were very few masques in the hall at this moment; but amongst these few were *three* in particular—two females and a gentleman—who from a little distance witnessed the scene which we have just described. To the eyes of ordinary observers there was nothing particularly remarkable in it—the withdrawing of a mask and veil, and a mutual recognition in consequence, being a common occurrence on such occasions; while the strong emotions that accompanied this special recognition were so transitory and so speedily subdued, that they might easily have been mistaken for the mere expression of surprise without any more powerful or vexatious feeling. But the three masques to whom we have particularly alluded as witnesses of this scene, not only watched it attentively, but likewise penetrated the full depth of its meaning. The reader will have no difficulty in understanding that these were Editha, Gertrude, and Lord Sackville; and the moment the scene itself took place, Editha, separating from the nobleman and her maid, glided up to the

CHAPTER CXIX.

THE FORGED LETTER.

spot where her husband and Lady Prescott were standing transfixed, gazing upon each other. Then taking off her mask, Editha suddenly disclosed her countenance to their view.

"Heavens! your wife, my lord!" ejaculated Lady Prescott, now seized with an overwhelming confusion.

"Yes—'tis I—this false man's wife," said Editha, in a tone which though low and rapid, was terrible with the accentuation of a bitter malignity. "I have heard and seen enough to understand the intimacy which has sprung up between you. I was close behind you both when first you met ere now. I heard *you*, my lord, lavish your poetic eloquence upon this woman: and I heard *you*," she added bending the lightnings of her eyes upon the almost fainting and utterly bewildered Lady Prescott, "confess that you loved him in return. Oh! it is a joy—it is a pleasure—a perfect paradise of revengeful feeling, to unmask a vile traitorous husband such as *you*—and a base intriguing courtesan such as *you*!"

And having thus poured forth the bitterness of her invectives and the lightning of her looks upon the Earl and Lady Prescott, Editha resumed her mask—glided up the staircase—and plunged into the saloons, where she was shortly after joined by Sackville and Gertrude, to whom she recounted all she had said to her husband and Lady Prescott.

Almost immediately afterwards Editha and Gertrude took their departure, exulting in the success of the stratagem which had thus led to such a merciless exposure of the Earl of Curzon: and Horace himself did not remain much longer amidst the festive scene, but ordered his own carriage and returned to Carlton House. But was he contented at having met the Countess of Curzon there that night? Assuredly so; because she had given him the fondest assurances that at the earliest opportunity his hopes should be gratified and that she would abandon herself to him!

Oh! these scenes of patrician depravity and aristocratic profligacy! Wherefore do we continue to pen them? Because they are faithful reflections, in the mirror of our narrative, of the vices, immoralities and crimes of that arrogant, heartless, and unprincipled class!

THE whole scene which took place at the foot of the staircase, as just described scarcely occupied a couple of minutes, even including the little episode which the sudden appearance of Editha introduced into the drama. While she was pouring forth her bitter invectives and bending the lightnings of her looks upon her husband and Lady Prescott, these two were rendered utterly speechless by the abruptness and also by the nature of the scene. The Earl saw in a moment that he was the dupe of a new stratagem on the part of his wife, and that when he assumed the character of the Cavalier so as to personate Lord Sackville, she by some means discovered his intent and had turned the tables upon him. Thus was it that through mingled astonishment and mortification, he lost all his presence of mind and remained with paralysed faculties, like a guilty man in the presence of a wife who seemed suddenly to acquire the right of performing the part of an outraged woman!

As for Lady Prescott—she had all along believed that she was to meet Lord Curzon and that he would be in the dress of a Cavalier. The conversation between them had taken a turn which she certainly thought extraordinary; and the reader has seen how strong were her feelings when accused of intriguing with Colonel Malpas, whom she only knew by sight, and with Mr. Emerson, whom she had never seen in her life! But when the Earl had put to her the question concerning her husband—that husband who had been dead for two years—it naturally struck the lady that there was either some fearful mistake, or else that she was being made the victim of a wanton insult. Then, as the Earl revealed his countenance, she of course was not surprised to behold the features of this nobleman, because it was precisely he whom she had come thither on purpose to meet—in whose behalf she had really been stricken with a passionate sentiment—and to whom she had freely and intentionally made an avowal of love. Conceive, then, her terror and dismay when on raising her veil and revealing her own face, she saw in a moment by *his* astonishment, that it was not she herself but *another* whom the Earl had come thither to meet; and then, before she was able to regain her composure, up stepped Editha, whom she immediately recognised to overwhelm her

with reproaches! Insulting, cutting, goading as the language was which the Countess of Curzon had addressed to her, how could she possibly feel otherwise than that she deserved it all? No wonder, then, that she cowered beneath the fiery glance and writhed under the torture of the lashing words which Editha poured upon her: no wonder that she was unable to give any reply or attempt a syllable either of bold denial or self-exculpation, in respect to the charges made against her by the indignant Countess!

We have paused to chronicle these few explanations in order to fill up any blanks with regard to emotions or incidents that may have occurred in the hasty outline which we sketched of the scene at the foot of the staircase. We now take up the thread of the narrative at the moment when Editha, speeding away from the presence of her husband and Lady Prescott, left them stupefied with what had just occurred, and overwhelmed with confusion. The Earl was the first to regain his composure; and putting on his mask, he said in a quick tone of excitement, "Resume your veil, dear lady—and let us seek some nook where we can converse together. I will give you the fullest explanations."

Lady Prescott drew down the veil over her countenance upon the brunette complexion of which sate a deadly pallor; and as she again took the Earl's arm, he could feel the glowing volume of her bosom swelling and sinking with tumultuous heavings, like the waves of the sea. After she had drawn down the veil, she cast a terrified look around, as if fearful lest the Countess of Curzon should reappear and commence another scene; but her courage, and therewith her composure, began to revive, when on glancing upon the three or four groups of masks scattered through the spacious hall, she saw by their manner that they had not taken any particular notice of the scene which had just occurred.

The Earl led her again up the staircase, into the drawing-room; and thence they passed into the conservatory, where they found themselves alone.

"Good heavens!" said Lady Prescott, in a voice full of that anguish to which she was now enabled to give free vent; "what a fatal occurrence! Wretched woman that I am! my disgrace will to-morrow be bruited throughout London! How seriously I am compromised with you! But, Curzon," she exclaimed, suddenly interrupting the course of her own ideas "explain all this! Wherefore write so urgent a letter enjoining me to be here,

and then seem surprised that 'tis I whom you have met——"

"My dear creature," interrupted the Earl of Curzon, "I ere now told you that I would give the fullest explanations. Know, then, that I this day intercepted a letter from Lord Sackville to my wife, giving her an appointment at this mansion and specifying not only the dress he would wear but also the pass-words to be used on the occasion. That dress was the costume of a Cavalier: those pass-words are the once which you and I this night exchanged. You can now understand wherefore I am here disguised in this costume to-night, and whom I really expected to meet."

"Ah! then the letter I have received is a forgery?" ejaculated Lady Prescott: "a vile base forgery? O heavens! how am I covered with ridicule in your eyes! and how shall I be disgraced in the eyes of the world! I am ruined—I am undone: my reputation is gone! The Queen will hear of it, and banish me from Court——"

"Compose yourself," said Curzon who experienced some sort of regard, though chiefly based upon sensual passion, for the handsome widow. "All may not turn out so bad as you now apprehend. We will talk upon that subject directly. But tell me—have you that letter about you——"

"Ah! yes—'tis here," responded Lady Prescott, in a tone indicative of a most mournful sense of humiliation; and thrusting her hand into her bosom she murmured, "I have the letter—but I dare not show it to you."

Her voice was scarcely audible, influenced as it was by her emotions of mingled anguish and shame and stifled too as the accents were by the thick veil through which they had to penetrate: for be it observed that it was in consequence of her voice being thus subdued by the folds of this veil, that the Earl had ere now (previously to the scene on the staircase) listened to it so long without perceiving that it was not the voice of his Countess.

"Yes—you must let me to see that note," said the Earl, taking her hands and pressing them in his own. "There can now be no secrets between us: we have gone too far to retract. The occurrences of this night have suddenly established between us the intimacy which half-a-dozen years could scarcely have created under other circumstances. Were this not the case think you that I would have revealed to your ears the fact that my wife is an intriguante—an accomplished intriguante—an

intrigante the strength of whose passions is only equal by her artifice in ministering to them! To confess myself a cuckold—to avow my knowledge of my own dishonour—to admit that I am duped and deceived, without being able to obtain a single proof against my abandoned wife—all this is painful and humiliating enough for me. Need you then, on your part, hesitate to show me that letter?"

"Ah! when it contains avowals and protestations made in your name," said the lady whose voice was still low and tremulous, "which you will perhaps refuse to confirm and sanction?"

"If the letter tells you that you are beautiful and assures you that your charms are great," cried Curzon, the forger of that letter has only said for me what I am fully prepared to say in my own behalf. Yes—you are handsome:—gloriously handsome: and I love you—I love you!"

Thus speaking, the Earl having assured himself by means of a rapid glance swept around the conservatory that no observer was nigh—caught Lady Prescott in his arms, tore away the veil from her face, and glued his lips to hers. All the sensual passions of the widow flamed up in a moment: and abandoning herself to a full tide of ecstasy which thrilled through her frame, she vibrated in his arms, supple and elastic as a wanton Bayadere craving other joys more replete with frenetic pleasure than even the foretasting raptures of this kiss. Then as the Earl, profiting by the occasion to indulge in amorous dalliance, gently invaded with his hand the treasures of the amorous widow's glowing bust, he was enabled to help himself to the note which she had hesitated to give him. Drawing it forth from the elysian temple which had been made its receptacle, and while she herself, blushing and trembling—panting and palpitating sank upon a seat to adjust her hair and resume her veil, the Earl ran his eyes over the contents of the letter:—

"Pardon me, dearest lady, for venturing to address you in such terms as these which I am about to adopt but the good feeling that sprang up between us last evening at Carlton House—the tender nature of the discourse which we held together—and the manner in which you received the little demonstrations of love which the opportunity permitted me to make, all have emboldened me to repeat the avowal of my feelings, in far more explicit terms. Although I have had the pleasure of your acquaintance for some few years past, and although I have ever regarded

you as one of the handsomest and most accomplished ladies of the day, it was nevertheless reserved until last night for your wit and beauty to assert a sudden but irresistible empire over my heart. This is the truth—the solemn truth: and I implore you to believe me when I declare that last night the influence of your loveliness, your fascinations, your graces, filled my soul with a boundless admiration. I was smitten with a deathless sentiment. Oh! do not reject my prayer because in the cold formal routine of the world's circumstances I am already married; do not scorn me because my hand is given to another—for my heart was mine own to bestow until last night; and now it is no longer mine—it is yours!

"The prayer that I am about to offer up is that you will grant me a meeting this night, so that I may explain my feelings more fully. The opportunity for such an interview is ready at hand. Lady Wenlock gives a masked ball to which of course you have received an invitation. May I entreat you to be there to-night soon after nine o'clock? I shall be dressed as a Cavalier with a small cap of the archer fashion, long ringlets, a velvet doublet, red belt, and yellow buskins. Of course I shall be masked. Be you there—masked or veiled, so that no one may recognize you. That you may incur no danger of compromising yourself by any error or mistake, I propose that you accost me with some such question as the following:—'*Wherefore, brave cavalier, hast thou left thy sword behind thee?*'—then if the response be, '*Because I expected to meet a gentle lady,*' you will know that you have accosted the right individual, and that 'tis I—your sincere admirer—who will thus, have given that answer. Do not fail me then, dearest lady:—for I love you most sincerely—most earnestly—and most devotedly; and I would give ten years of my life to possess your love in return. I have a thousand things to say; but must postpone them till to-night.

"Your affectionate

"CURZON."

The reader will of course understand that this was the letter which the Countess of Curzon had written in a hand simulating that of her husband, and which we said at the time was addressed to a certain person. This letter had been delivered by Gertrude at Lady Prescott's own residence: and believing that it really came from the Earl himself, she had

fallen into the snare so artfully set by the cunning and unprincipled Editha.

"'Tis my wife who has done this," said Curzon: then with a concentrated bitterness of look and accent, he observed, "She has completely turned the tables upon me!"

"And will she not make all London ring with the story?" asked poor Lady Prescott, with a deep sob.

"It would be wrong, very wrong," said the Earl, "were I attempt to buoy you up with a contrary hope. But if you love me, why not dare all—everything—and become my mistress openly? Were you not already prepared," he inquired, tenderly pressing her in his arms, "to gratify my fondest hopes?"

"Yes," she answered in a murmuring tone; "but then our amour would have been secret—my reputation would have continued untainted—and if an eligible offer of marriage had presented itself, I might have accepted it."

"True," said the Earl, still straining her in his arms: "but circumstances, you perceive, have, proved hostile to us, and we must now make the best of them."

"But can you not enter into some arrangement with your wife?" asked Lady Prescott: "can you not agree upon mutual forgiveness so that if you overlook *her* faults she will wink at *your* infidelities—the result being that she will keep secret incidents of this night?"

"Matters have become too serious between her and me," said Lord Curzon, "to admit of a compromise:"—and still he strained the handsome widow in his arms, once more drawing aside the veil from her countenance and covering her lips and cheeks with kisses.

"But my situation in the royal household," she murmured.

"You are not dependant upon it."

"No—I am rich—but then the honour—"

"Ah! some sacrifices must be at times made to love" whispered the Earl, in an endearing tone.

"Yes—I feel that it is so," murmured the amorous widow, in a voice that was languid and almost dying with sensual longings.

A quarter of an hour afterwards, the Earl of Curzon and Lady Prescott returned from Kew to London together in the same carriage and the rest of that night they passed in each other's company, at Mrs. Gale's fashionable house of accommodation in Soho Square.

CHAPTER CXX.

THE PEARLS.

VENETIA was somewhat indisposed by the fatigues attendant on the private theatricals, the banquet, and the late hour at which she retired to rest; and she did not quit her chamber during the whole of the day the incidents of which we have detailed in the last few chapters. She gave orders to her faithful Jessica that she wished to be left perfectly tranquil, and not to be left persecuted with visits, letters, or messages: and although invited to Lady Wenlock's masked ball, she was compelled to remain absent, so great was the sense of exhaustion which she experienced.

This was the first day that Venetia had passed alone for some time. The reader may be therefore well assured that she had a long communing with herself. She thought of many things—some agreeable some disagreeable—of gratified ambition on the one hand, and a career of dissipation on the other—of the exalted flight which she had taken up into the aristocratic heaven with a coronet upon her brow, and of the downward plunge which she had likewise made into the vortex of profligacy. But did she repent of the course which she had pursued? and in order to regain her virtue, would, she abandon her haughty rank and descend from the pedestal to which the royal hand had raised her? No such thing! The time for such regret was passed; nor were there ever such holy light burning in the sanctuary of her soul as would have served to irradiate a career of immaculate virtue. Within herself, as it were, did she possess the principles of her own moral ruin—the elements of degradation from pristine virtue and innocence. For she had passions to gratify and feelings to minister unto, which in themselves became incompatible with a virtuous career. Being originally so obscure and entertaining the ambition to rise so highly, how it was possible to attain that object without the sacrifice of virtue? Again, though she had exercised the moral courage as a matter of worldly calculation to remain virtuous until her marriage with Sackville, yet the moment that nuptial knot was tied and she had tasted the joys of love, all the desires that were inherent in her nature flamed up with volcanic ardour and she became as it were a veritable Messalina in a few short months!

Venetia had a generous mind, a large intellectual capacity, a cool judgment, and

a quick appreciation of everything that was tasteful, elegant, and refined; and yet her passions, when once the rein was given to them, threatened to plunge her into depravities the grossest and the vilest. How often has it been—alas, that we should be compelled to chronicle the fact!—that women of the strongest intelligence have proved themselves of the weakest morality: so that some who have wielded the sceptre of a mighty state and kept millions in awe, were unable to rule a little rebel passion or triumph over a single provocative desire!

During the current of Venetia's thoughts, there was a subject which intruded itself more than once. This was the fact that out of the six individuals who had originally laid the memorable wager concerning her, *four* had already revelled in her charms. She was the wife of one—the favourite mistress of another—had fallen into the arms of a third by sheer mistake—and had voluntarily abandoned herself as a paramour to the fourth. Thus Horace Sackville was her husband—the Prince Regent owned her as his favourite—the Earl of Curzon had passed a night in her arms through the mistake just alluded to—and Sir Douglas Huntingdon had been blessed by the joys of her spontaneous yielding. Of the six personages who had originally laid the memorable wager, the Marquis of Leveson and Colonel Malpas were the only two who had not possessed her; and these two she hated cordially. For the Marquis, made up as he was with all kinds of succedaneous materials, appeared in her eyes to be a loathsome monster of feculence and corruption; and Colonel Malpas was a detestable coward, a sneaking grovelling scoundrel, whose personal beauty could not for a single moment palliate those evil qualities which rendered him an abhorrence to a woman of Venetia's mind and spirit.

We have said that Venetia had chosen to pass the entire day alone. In the evening, as her husband was going to the masked ball, and would therefore not be home till late, she removed from their usual chamber into the elegant seclusion of her own boudoir and retiring to bed early, she soon fell into a sound and refreshing sleep. Having passed through the wondrous mazes and fanciful intricacies of several pleasant dreams, a shadow appeared all on a sudden to fall upon the sunlight of her thoughts: and the pleasurable nature of her visions underwent a rapid change, plunging her into the horrors of a nightmare. At length she awoke with a start;

and sitting up in bed, experienced an ineffable sensation of relief on finding herself in her own boudoir instead of the vile den where imagination had just been plunging. Upon the night-table near the couch burnt a silver lamp of exquisite workmanship, and which was fed with a perfumed oil compounded expressly for the use of Carlton House; on the larger table which stood in the middle of the room, were several letters, together with an object which appeared to Venetia's eyes to be a jewel-case.

"Jessica has placed upon that table all the missives which have arrived to-day," thought Venetia to herself: then consulting a watch which she took from beneath her pillow she found that it was just midnight.

Only midnight! and she had slept so soundly that she felt fully awake, without the slightest inclination to slumber again. The idea struck her that she would at least ascertain what that jewel-case meant, even if she did not examine her correspondence. Stepping therefore from the couch—her naked feet and ankles tripping glancingly in the dazzling polish of their whiteness and firmness, upon the rich carpet—and with the drapery hanging so negligently about her form that all the richness and grandeur of its luxuriant but firm proportions were displayed—she approached the table, opened the jewel case and found that it contained a magnificent string of pearls of the largest size she had ever seen. But from whom did this gift come? If the Prince were the donor, he would have presented them with his own hand, as was his invariable custom. The pearls therefore assuredly came not from his royal Highness. There was no note, nor card, nor any written intimation inside the box, nor fastened to it, to aid Venetia in her conjectures. Her curiosity was now piqued; for the pearls seemed to be of that costly nature which denoted some liberal and most probably wealthy donor; and she was naturally anxious to learn who the individual could be. At least thirty letters lay upon the table: doubtless amongst them would she find one clearing up the mystery! She therefore took all the letters, together with the case of pearls, in her hands; and tripped back to her couch.

But before she opened a single letter, Venetia could not resist the temptation of placing the string of pearls upon the rich masses of her auburn hair and then surveying herself in a little toilette hand-mirror which lay on the table close

by. It was one of those involuntary acts of vanity of which even the most intellectual women are capable, and to which all beautiful females are impelled as it were by the very consciousness of beauty. Venetia saw that the pearls became her admirably; and that though her hair was negligently tied up, its shining luxuriance set off those ornaments to their utmost advantage. But a smile of sweet triumph played upon her coral lips as the thoughts struck her that it was her hair which set off the exquisite beauty of the pearls, rather than the pearls setting off the glossy glory of those silken masses!

But while that smile was still lingering upon her lips, revealing pearls as pure, as white, and as even as the string which now rested upon her head, the feeling of curiosity to ascertain who sent the gift sprang up with additional force; and flinging down the mirror, she began opening the letters one after another. Hastily glancing at the name of each writer, so as to form an idea of the contents, she disposed of the epistles and notes with a running commentary uttered audibly and in a musing tone.

An invitation to the Duchess of Darlington's for next Monday evening. And how very courteously worded! *Dearest Lady Sackville.*" I remember that when I was yet plain Venetia Trelawney, my carriage one day accidentally came in contact with that of the magnificent Duchess, through the carelessness of *her own coachman*; when she gave me a look which said as plainly as ever eyes yet spoke, "*I wonder who this creature is whose carriage comes within even a dozen yards of mine!*" And now she is ready to kiss the ground upon which I tread. Ah! here is a letter from Mrs. Fitzherbert, demanding more places and pensions for her relatives and friends. And here is a note from Miss Bathurst stating that as she could not see me to-day when she called, she has written to remind me that I must procure the vacant Bishopric for her cousin the Dean, and a baronetcy for his second brother the Admiral, and pension for his other brother the great banker who has failed. "Well," continued Venetia, with a sigh, "all this must be done: but really these people are insatiable! Day after day, nothing but places, pensions, sinecures, emoluments, and honours, for this cormorant horde of Fitzherberts, Bathursts, and all their relatives, to even the hundredth remove! But, ah! what says Miss Bathurst here in a postscript?—that Mrs. and Miss Arbuthnot must positively be provided for

immediately—that the mother is anxious to become Bedchamber Woman in the household of the Queen or Princess Charlotte—and that Penelope is resolved to be nothing less than a Maid of Honour. Well, again I say it must all be done! Here is another invitation—and another—and another—and another," continued Venetia, opening letter after letter and tossing them away as soon as glanced at. "Ah! what is this?"—and her countenance assumed a different look as she opened a letter signed by *Jocelyn Loftus*.

This was not a letter to be either disposed of with a satirical comment, or to be tossed aside to be perused at leisure. But it was a letter the contents of which seemed to be as serious as they were lengthy: for as Venetia continued the perusal her look became more solemn, until it deepened into sorrowfulness:—then on the lashes of each eye slowly glimmered forth a tear—and presently those crystal drops rolled down the lady's cheeks, shining in their pearly path like twin drops of dew.

Presently a profound sob rose slowly from Venetia's bosom, which it convulsed with a great heaving; and then as she listlessly held the letter in her hand, when its perusal was ended, she murmured herself, "Perhaps it is better *thus*, after all!"

But, Oh! it was now a mockery—a painful mockery—for Venetia, humbled, sorrowful, and tearful as she was, to retain those dazzling pearls upon her brow. But heavens! the pearls were as a completely forgotten at this moment as if there were no such things in the world, and there she sate on her elegant couch, with the ornaments on her hair and the tears in her eyes—a touching monument of the moral that the symbols of triumph and of sorrow, of worldly pride and of heartfelt pain are singularly united in the destiny of mortals.

At length, slowly awakening from that painful reverie, Venetia folded up the letter which had produced such a change in her mood, and carefully deposited it under her pillow. Then, as her eyes fell upon the jewel-case, the gift of the pearls was suddenly recalled to her memory: and snatching them from her head, she flung them with a sort of frenzied impetuosity across the room, exclaiming, "Begone! in this moment of my deep humiliation, thou seemest a mockery and a reproach!"

She then slowly reclined her head upon her pillow; and gave way to the train of thoughts which the letter from Jocelyn Loftus had conjured up. Sleep gradually stole upon her eyes; and her sorrowful

feelings, whatever their nature might have been, were soon steeped in oblivion.

At nine o'clock on the following morning Jessica softly and slowly stole into the room. Her mistress was still sleeping—the cheeks gently flushed as if with the soft excitement of some vision—her head resting upon one naked arm plump to the eye and brilliant in its alabaster fairness—while the lips, slightly apart, revealed the pearls within that mouth which seemed formed only to breathe the most fragrant sweets or to receive the delicious kisses of love. Stealthily, for fear of awakening her, was Jessica about to retire from the boudoir so as to allow her mistress to sleep on, when she suddenly beheld the string of pearls lying upon the carpet. She stopped down and picked them up: and while she was contemplating them with admiration, Venetia awoke.

"What a splendid gift, my lady," exclaimed the abigail. "Might I inquire from whom it comes?"

"I know not," answered Venetia. "Was there any letter accompanying the jewel-case that contained the pearls?"

"To be sure, my lady" returned Jessica. "The hall-porter gave both the case and the letter to me last night, and I brought them into the boudoir along with all the other correspondence which had arrived for your ladyship during the day. I stole in while you slept—"

"Yes—I awoke in the middle of the night," observed Venetia, "and found all those letters upon the table. Some of them I opened, as you perceive—others I left until to-day," she added, a shade appearing upon her countenance as she recollected how the examination of her correspondence had been interrupted by the painful reflections springing from the perusal of Jocelyn's letter.

"Something has occurred to annoy your ladyship?" said Jessica, immediately observing the altered countenance of her mistress.

"Yes: amongst those letters there was one, which saddened and perplexed me cruelly," answered Venetia. "But no matter. After all, perhaps, 'tis as well that this discovery should have been made at once," she added in a musing tone: then suddenly brightening up, she proceeded to open the letters that remained as yet unread from the previous night's examination. "What astounding impudence!" she suddenly cried as her looks settled in astonishment upon the signature of one of the letters. "But is it possible that the pearls were sent by him?"

"To whom does your ladyship allude?" asked Jessica.

"To the Marquis of Leveson," was the response: and Venetia proceeded to run her eyes over the letter which she held in her hand and the contents of which were as follow:—

"Leveson House, December 11th, 1814,

"The Marquis of Leveson presents his most respectful regards to Lady Sackville, and begs her acceptance of the trifle accompanying this note. The Marquis is well aware that it is an act of great presumption and boldness on his part thus to intrude himself even for a single instant upon the notice of Lady Sackville: but inasmuch as he strives to address her in the profoundest humility and with every feeling of respect, he ventures to hope that Lady Sackville will accord him a full and complete pardon for the past. The Marquis is profoundly grieved at having so deeply incurred the displeasure of Lady Sackville, and while he is resolved most faithfully and honourably to fulfil the compact so recently entered into with her ladyship, through the medium of Sir Douglas Huntingdon, he believes and hopes that it is no infringement of that compact thus to lay his homage at the feet of Lady Sackville, and beseech her forgiveness for all bygone offences.

"To prove that the Marquis of Leveson is unfeignedly sincere in his desire to enter into the good graces of Lady Sackville, and that he would gladly and joyously seek any opportunity to manifest his friendship and his respectful devotion towards her ladyship, he begs to state that the *hundred pearls* now sent to Lady Sackville represent *as many thousand pounds*; and if Lady Sackville would so far forget her antipathy towards the Marquis of Leveson as to grant him an interview, he would explain in a few words how the accompanying string of pearls can possibly be of such pecuniary value to her ladyship."

"What on earth can the drivelling old idiot mean?" exclaimed Venetia, too much amazed to be indignant: then having handed the letter to Jessica, she inquired, after a pause, "Can you understand what he aims at?"

"There is some artifice concealed beneath this appearance of profound respect," observed Jessica: "but if I were your ladyship I would see the Marquis and ascertain what his real meaning can be. It would appear at first sight as if, in some way or another, he was offering your ladyship a hundred thousand

pounds : for, as he says, there are *hundred* pearls upon this string, and the letter declares that each one is worth a *thousand*. How he can make this out, I do not understand : because beautiful as the pearls may be, they are worth at the outside but a few hundreds——”

“Oh! if he thinks to purchase my favours with even a hundred thousand pounds,” exclaimed Venetia, the glow of triumph suffusing her countenance, and her lips curling haughtily at the same time —“he is much mistaken. What! I— young, rich, and beautiful as I am—to abandon myself to such a loathsome mass of corruption as that man! No—no—ten thousand times, no! But nevertheless, for the sake of gratifying my curiosity, I will see him in order to ascertain what he means. Go you Jessica, to Leveson House, see the Marquis yourself—and tell him that he may call upon me at mid-day precisely. I will not write a line to him—nor will I send a message by any, save a confidential person such as you, for the Marquis shall never have reason to boast of my favours—and the world shall never have the slightest pretence for saying, that Lady Sackville surrendered herself to such a superannuated sensualist! Those admirers on whom I do bestow my favours, must be the young, the handsome, and the attractive—not the old, the ugly, and the repulsive. ‘Tis sufficient,” she murmured to herself, “to be compelled to submit to the embraces of a horrid sensualist such as the Prince.”

Jessica hastened away to Leveson House—obtained an interview with the Marquis—and delivered the message from Venetia. The nobleman was scarcely able to conceal the delight which he experienced at a result that he had evidently hardly ventured to anticipate; and in his joy he thrust a bank-note for twenty guineas into Jessica’s hands. The abigail, charmed, with this munificence, returned to Carlton House, saying to herself. After all, Lord Leveson is not such a very nasty-looking man if I were in her ladyship’s place—— But no matter : I dare say it will end as his lordship wishes : for that he *does* hope and expect to win her ladyship, is evident enough,”

Punctual at the appointed hour, the Marquis of Leveson made his appearance at Carlton House, and was conducted to the drawing-room where Venetia, attired in an elegant morning-dress, was waiting to receive him. Rising from her seat in a manner coldly courteous, she saluted him with a formal inclination of her head and

slightly indicating a chair, she resumed her own place on the sofa. The Marquis, whose looks and bearing indicated the most respectful admiration, took the seat thus formally offered him : and with the courteous ease of polished breeding, he said, “May I flatter myself that your ladyship has deigned to forgive me for the past?”

“There are insults and outrages,” replied Venetia, coldly, “which cannot be consigned to oblivion,—at the same time they may be so far pardoned as to permit the individuals themselves to meet in society and exchange the usual courtesies of acquaintanceship.”

“To be restored to your ladyship’s favour on any terms will prove an indescribable relief to my feelings,” said the Marquis, with a low bow and a half-smile.

“I now await,” observed Venetia, with a slight curling of the lip and elevation of the head, as much as to imply that she would not condescend to take notice of the remark the nobleman had just made and in which he had chosen to assume that he was restored to her favour.—“I am awaiting the explanation of a certain passage in your lordship’s letter, relative to these trinkets :”—and she pointed towards the pearls which lay in the jewel-case upon the table.

“The passage was doubtless ambiguous to your ladyship,” said the Marquis ; “and I purposely left it so.—inasmuch as a full explanation of my meaning, if unasked and uninvited by you, might be construed into a breach of the compact entered into between us the other day under such peculiar circumstances at my house.”

“Proceed, my lord,” said Venetia, in a tone of mild command ; “and give me your explanation without any farther preface.”

“Then, of whatever nature this explanation may be,” said the Marquis, inquiringly, “you grant me full permission beforehand to offer it? and you will not hold whatever I may say to be a violation of the future line of conduct enjoined to me on your behalf by Sir Douglas Huntingdon?”

“I give your lordship free permission to speak plainly,” answered Venetia. “But understand me well—it is curiosity, and curiosity alone, which prompted me to grant this interview, and now induces me to listen to the explanation which your lordship may have to give.”

“I am honoured and delighted by being admitted to your ladyship’s presence on any terms,” responded the Marquis of Leveson, with another low bow : then

taking the string of pearls from the table, he said, "Your ladyship has recently entered upon a career the most brilliant, the most triumphant, and the most resplendent: but you will find that it is the most costly and the most expensive. The sources of your income must necessarily be limited to certain bounds: but, on the other hand, boundless will be the constantly recurring drains made in a thousand ways upon your purse. Forgive me for thus turning the discourse upon so vile a subject as *money*. My experience in the world is greater than yours: and you will soon find that my words are true. Therefore is it that I propose to constitute myself *your banker in reserve*, when your regular banker shall be overdrawn. Here are a hundred pearls upon this string: and each one, when presented to me by your own hand, shall be considered equivalent to a cheque or draft for *a thousand pounds*. You may present them singly, or as many as you like at a time—or all at the same moment if you choose—and the demand shall be duly honoured. I thus open for your ladyship's use a credit, as your banker in reserve for one hundred thousand pounds."

"And what condition is attached to this unheard-of munificence?" asked Venetia, with a satirical smile: "for I am well aware that your lordship is playing the usurer with me in one way or another."

"Yes—frankly I admit that it is so," replied the Marquis of Leveson. "I am purposely, seriously, and deliberately laying out my money as a satisfactory interest."

"And that interest?" said Venetia, interrogatively.

"Your love," rejoined the Marquis, gazing at her fixedly in the face, in order to observe how she would take the answer just given.

"My love?" she echoed, with a voice and look which showed that she had anticipated the reply. "I am certainly flattered at the high value you set upon it. But do you really propose to purchase what you term my *love* for one hundred thousand pounds?"

"Let not such a word as *purchase* pass between us," said the nobleman. "In a spirit of speculative friendship, I open to you a credit on my purse to the amount named—with the understanding that on that day and in that hour when you shall present the *last* pearl of the hundred upon this string, you will not retreat from my arms when I fling them around your neck and say, '*Venetia, you are mine!*'"

"You have now proved yourself explicit indeed," observed Lady Sackville. "I will not be angry with you—nor will I ridicule you for the proposal you have made. Nor shall I return the pearls——"

"Ah!" ejaculated the Marquis in a subdued tone of triumph; "then you consent to the proposition?"

"I consent to it thus far," returned Venetia, rising from her seat,— "that if I ever *do* present these symbolic cheques upon you, my self-constituted banker in reserve, I shall consider myself bound by the most solemn and sacred ties of honour to pay you the interest for which you have stipulated. But believe me, my lord," she added, with a smile most sweetly wicked and ravishingly malicious as it revealed her ivory teeth,— "believe me, my lord when I assure you that these pearls so far from ever returning into your hands, will be retained in my jewel coffer as a proof that under no possible circumstances could Lady Sackville dream of selling herself to the Marquis of Leveson!"

"We shall see," said the nobleman, with a low bow.

"Yes—we shall see," answered Venetia, with cold and reserved salutation.

The Marquis of Leveson then took his departure well pleased with the result of his interview and confident of beholding the success of his extraordinary proceeding at no very distant date.

Immediately on his return to Albemarle Street he sent his confidential valet Brockman in search of Captain Tash; and in the course of the day the redoubtable officer was discovered in the act of chastising, or what he called "administering the bastinado" to the keeper of an eating-house for having kept him waiting five minutes past the hour at which his dinner was ordered to be ready. The man Robin had shrunk into a corner of the room, where he was endeavouring to contract himself into as small a space as possible; and as for the eating-house-keeper himself, he was receiving the captain's blows with as much meekness as possible, seeing that the gallant officer, who for some months past had been in possession of ample funds, was one of his best customers. The entrance of Brockman put an end to the scene; and Captain Tash, followed by his man Robin, hastened to accompany the valet to Albemarle Street. The Captain was there introduced into Leveson House, while Robin remained standing bold upright against a lamp-post at a little distance.

"Now, my good fellow," said the Marquis, when the Captain and he were alone.

together, "I wish you to do me a service, in which there is money to be earned. I need not ask whether you are acquainted with Lord and Lady Sackville: for well do I remember the part which played in their behalf at Colonel Malpas's house a couple of months ago. What I require you to do is to throw yourself in Lord Sackville's way—to insinuate yourself into his confidence—to obtain a hold upon him—to make yourself necessary to him—to lead him into all kinds of pleasures and dissipations—to induce him to gamble—in a word, to plunge him into every species of extravagance. Find out jewellers, and horse-dealers, and all kinds of persons who will give him credit—but no bill discounters to lend him money to pay the liabilities which he may thus contract. I wish you, Captain Tash," continued the Marquis, "to do everything to render Lord Sackville extravagant and a spendthrift: for I have a particular object to serve, which it is not necessary to explain to you, but which can only be carried out by plunging Sackville into debts and difficulties. And mind—if you can succeed in doing all this, never fail to urge him to apply to his wife for money when he wants it. Let him be importunate too with her—for she *can*, and *must*, find him the means to gratify his extravagances—so that you must now allow him to take any refusal from her. Come to me from time to time not only to report progress, but also to receive such recompense as I may consider you to deserve. There are a hundred guineas as an earnest of my liberality. So, to work at once—and let not the grass grow underneath your feet."

Captain Tash readily undertook a commission which promised to be so lucrative; and making his bow to the Marquis he strode forth from Leveson house with such an awful swagger in his gait, and with his huge hat stuck so much on one side, that even his man Robin was astounded at the demeanour of his master.

"Follow me, my good and faithful servant," said Tash, with the air of a king addressing a subject.

"Where to?" asked Robin, shrinking back as if he were about to condense himself into the thinness of the lamp-post against which he had been planted.

"Where to?" ejaculated Tash, with inconceivable magnificence of look: "why, to Carlton House, to be sure!"—and giving his huge life-preserver a terrific thump upon the pavement, he turned and walked along with so grand an air that a

stranger would have thought all Albemarle Street belonged to him.

"Well, I wonder what is in the wind now," said Robin to himself as he sneaked stealthily along at a humble distance behind his master, like a spaniel at the heels of a bull-dog.

CHAPTER CXXI.

TRE FIVE THOUSAND GUINEAS.

The reader will be kind enough to remember that Mr. Emmerson wrote a letter to the Countess of Curzon, beseeching an early interview with her inasmuch as he had a certain communication to make relative to Colonel Malpas. Now, as Editha well knew that this letter had passed through her husband's hands and had of course been read by him, she was not imprudent enough either to call upon the money-broker at his office, or give him any appointment elsewhere, but she sent her faithful confidante Gertrude to explain to him how his letter had been intercepted by her husband and read by him before it reached her hands.

The astute and sharp-witted abigail proceeded to acquit herself of this commission; and repairing to Nichols Lane at about eleven o'clock in the forenoon of the day following the memorable incidents at Lady Wenlock's she obtained an immediate interview with Mr. Emmerson. This took place in his own private room; but Theodore Varian, who was listening at the door the whole time, overheard everything that passed between his master and Gertrude.

"What on earth could have thus suddenly raised the suspicion of his lordship?" exclaimed the bill-broker, in mingled astonishment and dismay, when Gertrude had delivered to him the message of the Countess.

"I know not sir," responded the abigail: "or rather I should observe that it is perfectly intelligible how his lordship's suspicions are always excited now, relative to her ladyship—since that terrible night when I had to lower myself from the window in Grosvenor Street, and hasten to Soho Square to warn her ladyship and you of what was going on——"

"To be sure;" observed Emmerson, much bewildered, and trembling all over. "As you say," it is natural indeed that his lordship's suspicions should always be awake. But what will be the result o

all this? I tremble to think of it. There will be action for *crim. con.*—exposure—damages—and so forth."

"Mr. Emmerson I am ashamed of you," said Gertrude with indignation. "I did not come hither to hear you whine and pine on your own account, but to listen to what you have to say relative to Colonel Malpas."

"Ah! the villain," cried Emmerson: he has written me a long letter, explaining his position. He says that I have been the means of ruining him by locking him up in gaol—that his creditors have seized all his furniture and plate, and sold off everything at his house—and that his wife has gone back to her relations who will not do anything for him. He says also that he has four courses left open for adoption: one is to commit suicide, which he does not admire—the second is to stay in prison all his life, which he does not fancy—the third is to go to the Insolvent's Court, from which he would be certain to be sent back—and the fourth is to turn rogue and rascal in right down earnest, so as to liberate himself in spite of all consequence. This last course is the one he proposes to adopt: and what do you think he means?"

"I really cannot tell," answered Gertrude. "Pray explain."

"With all the cool impudence and brazen effrontery imaginable," continued Emmerson, "he assures me in his letter, that unless I choose to liberate him from the Kings Bench, he shall send and inform the Countess of Curzon that he will make public all the particulars of his amour with her——"

"The villain!" ejaculated Gertrude, her whole frame trembling with indignation; for we have already said that she was accustomed to identify herself with the interests of her much-loved mistress. "But what could he mean by thus writing to you his threats relative to the Countess? Does he suspect that there is anything between her ladyship and yourself?"

"I fear so," responded Emmerson. "He is very sharp—as all such rescals are. Remember—since you are acquainted with everything that regards your mistress—it was at Mrs. Gale's that I overheard the conversation between Malpas and the Countess——"

"Yes, yes," observed Gertrude, impatiently: "it was concerning the forged bills. You were introduced into the house and placed in an adjacent room that night by Malpas himself——"

"And since then Malpas has doubtless heard, although he be in prison," resumed

the bill-broker, "that I have visited at Lady Lechmere's and have become to a certain degree intimate with Lady Curzon. Think you, then that a cunning fellow like Malpas will not suspect how it was that I thus became a visitor at Lady Lechmere's?—will he not put two and two together?—does he not know full well the services which Lady Lechmere has been in the habit of rendering the Countess? and will he not now naturally suppose that I have been introduced thither in order that *the same services* may be rendered for the advantage of the Countess and myself? Besides, if once his suspicions in that respect were aroused, he would have thought nothing of employing a spy to watch the movements of myself and Editha: or intimate as he is with Mrs. Gale, he may have heard from her lips."

"Yes—I see that there are a hundred ways in which Colonel Malpas may have been led to suspect your intimacy with her ladyship; and we will take it for granted that he does so. Now tell me precisely what it is he threatens——"

"That he will apply to Lady Curzon to use her influence with me to liberate him: and if she will not consent, that he will expose her in every way—'*and in more ways*,' he says, with a diabolical ambiguity, '*than she dream of*.'" Now, then, you know the worst. What is to be done?"

"What is to be done?" exclaimed Gertrude: "how can you ask me such a question? There is but one course—and that is to stop his mouth by yielding instantaneous compliance with his demands. In a word, give him his liberty."

"Most assuredly, if your mistress shall desire it," said Emmerson. "But recollect that by thus showing myself frightened at his menaces, I shall as it were be admitting that I myself have something to fear from his threatened exposure of her ladyship. He will be led to practise farther extortions—he will become a tyrant over us——"

"It cannot be helped," interrupted Gertrude, impatiently: "we must think only of to-day, and wait till to-morrow comes before we trouble ourselves concerning the case it may bring. But have you anything better to propose?—you seem to be reflecting——"

"Yes—I was thinking whether it would not be much more prudent," said Emmerson, "if I were to ride it with a high hand towards Malpas and refer him entirely to the Countess. Then her ladyship might send him over the money—with

which of course I should provide her,—to free himself from prison by these means. There would thus be an avoidance of anything like an admission of an amour between myself and her ladyship. Such a precaution would leave no room for future menaces on the part of Malpas with respect to the Countess and me——”

“I understand you perfectly well,” said Gertrude with a peculiar smile; “and I approve of your suggestions. But whatever is to be done, let it be done, quickly: because the Countess will be in a painful state of suspense until I return.”

“We will arrange the proceeding off-hand,” said Emmerson. “In the first place, see what I shall write to Malpas.”

The money-broker accordingly sat down and penned the following letter:—

“Nicholas Lane, December 12, 1814.

“Mr. Emmerson presents his compliments to Colonel Malpas and begs to inform him that he has received with mingled astonishment and indignation the letter which Colonel Malpas has written, and in which certain threats are contained relative to a lady whose name Mr. Emmerson forbears from mentioning. Mr. Emmerson is but slightly acquainted with that lady; and under ordinary circumstances he should decline being the means of conveying to her ladyship any such unmanly threats. But inasmuch as he has previously had to arrange a very unpleasant affair relative to certain bills of exchange where-in Colonel Malpas and the lady aforesaid were engaged, he will once again so far intrude upon that lady’s notice as to make her acquainted with the new dangers that now menace her from her unfortunate acquaintance with such a man as Colonel Malpas.”

“That will do excellently,” said Gertrude. “Coward poltroon, and unprincipled scoundrel though he be, he would not for his own sake show such a letter as that to anybody! And now, what is the next step?” she inquired.

“The next step,” answered Emmerson, “is for me to provide five thousand guineas, which Lady Curzon will have to send over to Colonel Malpas with some appropriate letter which she will know full well how to write in the proper spirit: and as he will have to pay that amount to my solicitor in order to release himself, the money will come back to me again in the course of a few days—and therefore it will be all the same in the end. Let me see,” added Emmerson, consulting his watch: “it is now half-past eleven. Hasten you back to Grosvenor Street—

explain everything to the Countess—and let her have the note ready written for Colonel Malpas. I will send up the money at three o’clock: it must be in notes and gold, and not in a cheque because of course Colonel Malpas is not to know from whom her ladyship receives it.”

“But for heaven’s sake,” cried Gertrude, “take care how you send the money—remember that his lordship the Earl may open any letter: or parcel addressed to the Countess——”

“True!” ejaculated Emmerson: then after a few moments’ reflection, he said, “Be you on the look out precisely as the clock strikes three; and I will either call myself or else send some confidential person to Grosvenor Street with a parcel directed to her ladyship. The amount shall all be in notes; so that if I send, the messenger will not know what it contains.”

At three o’clock precisely, then either yourself or some one on your behalf will call,” said Gertrude. “It is not likely that I shall have an opportunity of waiting about in the hall; but the parcel can be given to the hall-porter, and all will be right.”

With this understanding Gertrude and the money-broker separated. But we need hardly observe that at the moment when Theodore Varian heard the lady’s-maid taking leave of his employer, he retreated rapidly from the door at which he had been listening, and resumed his seat on the high stool at the dusk, where he appeared to be writing away with as much earnestness as if he had not for a single moment interrupted his own labours or diverted his attention to any other object.

Shortly after Gertrude’s departure Mr. Emmerson went out to procure the money which he had to send to the Countess of Curzon. He had not so much in his banker’s hands—for, in fact, he had overdrawn considerably of late in order to minister to her extravagances, as we have already informed the reader. But he had plenty of other resources, and had no fear of experiencing any difficulty in obtaining the amount by the hour named.

Meantime, the instant the money-broker went out, Theodore Varian penned the following note to the Earl of Curzon:—

“At three o’clock to-day a parcel containing bank-notes to the amount of five thousand guineas, and addressed to the Countess, will be left at your lordship’s house. The sum is intended to be sent over to the King’s Bench to release Colonel Malpas from prison. The parcel will

either be given into the hands of Gertrude, or of the hall porter—and to no one else.

"Your lordship's humble servant.
"T. V."

In about half-an-hour the office-boy, who had been upon some errand, returned; and Varian then had an opportunity of slipping out for a few minutes. Giving the note to a ticket-porter, he charged him to repair with all possible speed to Grosvenor Street and deliver it into the hands of the Earl of Curzon himself. The messenger hurried away to execute his commission; and Theodore returned into the office, chuckling at the incident which had thus transpired to gratify his vindictive feelings towards Emmerson.

In the meantime Gertrude had retraced her way to Grosvenor Street and had communicated to the Countess everything that had taken place in Nicholas Lane.

"With all his infatuation for me," said Editha, in a tone of mingled spite and disgust, "this money-making citizen is particularly careful of his own personal interest and safety. He will not compromise himself in any way with Colonel Malpas; but he will allow *me* to be made the cat's-paw and tool in the matter."

"My dear lady," said Gertrude, "I saw through the money-brokers' meaning all the time. In fact, artifice is covered with a veil so exceedingly flimsy that it would be impossible not to penetrate it at once. But I appeared to give it my most cordial approval; and I *did* approve of it in reality—for, to please *me*, Mr. Emmerson cannot possibly be too guarded in respect to his connexion with your ladyship. I should be sorry indeed if any suspicions which even such a man as Colonel Malpas may have entertained in this respect, were confirmed; and I am truly glad that they will now be quite set at rest by the letter which Mr. Emmerson has written."

"I understand you, Gertrude," said Editha: "the fact is, this amour of mine with the stock-broker is one little creditable to me and of which I have no reason to be proud. But you know that it was one entirely of convenience. Embarrassed as I have been for money, I should not have known what to do without him."

"That is all well and good, my lady," said the girl; "and I do not blame you for having formed the connexion. I was only saying that I was glad when Mr. Emmerson of his own accord proposed a plan which was at once calculated to give the lie to Malpas's suspicions."

"To be sure—you have taken the proper view of the case," said Editha. "And now for the note which I am to write to the Colonel. Give me my desk. But I know not how I shall acquit myself of so unpleasant a task."

Editha made several beginnings, but tore up sheet after sheet of paper; and it was not until she had made at least a dozen attempts that she could achieve anything calculated to satisfy herself. At length she finished the following epistle:—

"One who has every reason to regret that she ever knew you—much more that she ever loved you—has just received another proof of that cowardly selfishness which prompts you to sacrifice the most sacred ties to your own immediate interests. From a gentleman in the City, to whose generous forbearance both you and I were largely indebted on a certain occasion, I have received an intimation of the menaces which you have thought fit to hold out concerning me. Were I of your own sex and subjected to only one hundredth part of this crowning insult, I should wreck a fearful vengeance upon you: but being a defenceless, frail, and erring woman, I have deemed it more prudent to succumb to the cruel extortioner. That extortioner is yourself!—and herewith I enclose you bank-notes to the amount of five thousand guineas for which sum I am indebted to the kindness of my sisters, who with some little difficulty have made up the amount at so short a notice. Accept it then—liberate yourself—and trouble me no more. Infamous beyond all known infamy would your conduct be—dastardly beyond any cowardice which the world has yet seen—were you to make me henceforth the object of your persecutions. Surely you will appreciate how different is the treatment you receive at my hands from that which is shown towards you by your creditor Mr. Emmerson. *He* will not grant you your release without the payment of the utmost farthing: whereas I whom you have so cruelly, cruelly outraged and whose weakness you so basely exposed to that very man,—I am now doing everything for you. If, then, there be a spark of generous feeling left in your soul, forbear henceforth from persecuting me!"

"Do you approve of this, Gertrude?" inquired Editha, who liked to flatter her faithful dependant by seeming to consult her on all occasions.

"Nothing can be better, my lady," was the response, after Gertrude had

read the letter. "It is now half-past one o'clock—and the money is to be here at three. The Earl has not come home yet——"

"Is it not most absurd and anomalous" exclaimed Editha, "that a husband may absent himself from home all night and sleep where he chooses, whereas the wife can scarcely stir abroad even in the day time without being watched and espied? No doubt but that my precious husband has passed the night in the arms of his new flame, Lady Prescott. But, thank heavens! I am not jealous. What a happiness it would be if the Earl were not jealous of me?"

"After all," observed Gertrude, "the equivoques, the freaks, the stratagems and the artifices to which that jealousy on his part has compelled us to have recourse, constitute a rare sport and sustain an agreeable excitement. At the same time, your ladyship must really be more prudent. But—ah! that double knock at the door is the Earl's! His lordship has just come home. I wonder whether he will say anything to your ladyship when you meet, relative to the ludicrous exposures of last night."

"No," observed Editha: "he will doubtless appear just as if nothing at all particulars had taken place. But you had better go at once, Gertrude, and tell the hall-porter to receive the parcel when it comes and keep it until he sees you again. He must be sure and not allow anybody to catch sight of it——"

"Trust to me," said Gertrude: and she hastened from the apartment.

Meantime the Earl of Curzon had just returned home, after having passed the night and the whole of the forenoon in the arms of Lady Prescott at Mrs. Gale's fashionable house of accommodation. Upon entering the hall, his lordship received the note which Theodore Varian had sent him; and immediately comprehending whose name the initials were intended to represent, and from what quarter the money was therefore coming, the Earl was not slow in making up his mind that such an amount, if he once succeeded in getting possession of it, should be considered his own lawful booty. He therefore stationed himself at the dining-room window, in order to observe all arrivals at the front door.

Slowly passed the time; but at length the Earl's watch showed him that it was close upon three o'clock. And now, concealed behind the curtain, he kept his eyes intently fixed upon the front door

steps. In a few minutes a well dressed person passed in front of the house—drew a brown paper parcel from his pocket—and having consulted the direction, looked at the number on the front door, evidently to assure himself that it was the right house. Immediately afterwards, he ascended the steps: and the porter, who, having been duly instructed by Gertrude, was on the watch at the hall-window, open the door before the visitor had time to knock. This individual who was a friend of Emmerson's instantaneously delivered the parcel into the porter's hands, and took his hurried departure without uttering a word.

The porter closed the front door, and thrust the parcel into the capacious pocket of his scarlet livery-coat. At the moment Gertrude came flitting down the stairs, and the Earl of Curzon issued forth from the dining-room. For an instant the lady's maid stopped short, and hung back on the stair-case in the hope that the Earl would pass on his way and leave the coast clear for her to receive the parcel from the hands of the porter. But to the ineffable dismay of Gertrude, the noble man walked straight across the hall to where the porter had just resumed his seat in his great leathern chair.

"Was the parcel for me that just arrived?" demanded the Earl: and the words struck like the knell of doom, not only upon the ears of Gertrude, but likewise on those of the unhappy Editha who was anxiously listening on the landing above.

"Eh—what, my lord?" stammered the hall-porter, suddenly turning as crimson as his coat and then as white as his neck-cloth.

"I spoke plain enough, fellow," exclaimed the Earl, in a stern voice. "That parcel which came a moment ago—was it for me, I say?—because I was expecting one.——"

"No, my lord—it was—it was—that is to say—I mean," stammered the porter, not knowing what to do, and glancing uneasily from the Earl before him to Gertrude on the stairs, then back to the Earl again.

"Show me that parcel immediately," said the nobleman, in a quick voice and with imperious manner. "Come — be prompt—give it me at once——"

"But, my lord——"

"Silence, sirrah?"

"The parcel was not for your lordship," urged the porter.

"Give it to me, I say!" thundered the Earl, as he grasped the miserable wretch by the collar.

The porter accordingly at once produced the brown paper packet: but fleet as an arrow did Gertrude bound from the stairs on which she had been hitherto transfixed; and utterly losing all her presence of mind, she screamed in wild hysterical assents, "No, no—it belongs to my mistress."

But the Earl of Curzon gave a triumphant laugh as he seized the packet from the hand of the astounded hall-porter; and Editha, on hearing all that thus took place, rushed down the stairs in an agony of mind more easily conceived than described.

At this moment the Earl was the only one who retained anything bordering on presence of mind; and anxious to avoid a farther scene in the hall which might end by reaching the ears of the entire household, at once hurried back into the dining-room, closely followed by the Countess and Gertrude.

"Your lordship will please to observe, to whom that parcel is addressed." at once began Editha, a dead pallor appearing beneath the transparent duskiness of her complexion, and her entire frame quivering like a harp-string.

"Yes," said the Earl with a smile of satanic triumph: it is addressed to her ladyship the Countess of Curzon!"

"Then give it to me," said Editha, advancing towards him.

"Softly, softly" he said, waving her back with one hand as he clutched the precious packet with the other. "As your husband, madam, I assert the right of opening this parcel—and that right I intend to exercise."

"You dare not!" said Editha, in a faint, and dying voice.

"Behold!" he exclaimed with sardonic malice in the look that he flung upon his writhing, agonizing wife: and tearing open the parcel, he exclaimed, "Hah! bank-notes—and what a pile of them! Nothing could have arrived more seasonably; for I have a number of pressing debts to pay."

"Good heavens! you do not—you cannot mean that you will appropriate that money?" gasped the wretched Editha;—and staggering back, she would have fallen had she not been caught in the arms of Gertrude, who placed her upon the sofa.

"If the money be sent to you" continued the Earl, "then it is *yours*—and

whatever is yours, is *mine*. This is the marriage law. But there is a letter enclosed which will doubtless throw some light on the subject."

The Countess of Curzon, goaded to desperation, sprang to her feet in order to rush upon her husband and tear the letter from his hand but vertigo suddenly seized upon her, and she fell back again, not deprived of consciousness, but with a maddening sensation of bewilderment in the brain.

"The Earl, rejoicing in his wife's agony, the extent of which he failed not to observe, tore open the letter and in a voice of terrible irony read the following lines—

"I forward you, my adored one, the amount promised, and pray you to lose no time in despatching it to the proper quarter. Gertrude will have explained everything to you; and I am sure you will agree that it is far better for you to appear as the principal agent in this matter, than for me to yield to the villain's threats.

"Your's ever affectionately."

"No name—eh?" exclaimed the Earl. "But there is no difficulty in guessing who is the writer. In fact, I know Emmerson's penmanship well enough. But let us see how much we have here. One—two—three four—" and he went on counting the bank notes, each for one hundred pounds until at length he exclaimed, "five thousand guineas, on my soul! Well, this is a lucky windfall."

"But you cannot—you will not—you dare not self-appropriate it," exclaimed the Countess, once more springing to her feet. "Do you not see," she exclaimed, in an hysterical tone, "that it is intended for a special purpose?"

"But supposing that I, as your husband, consider, that your funds would be misapplied," exclaimed the Earl, "unless they went to pay my debts—have I not a right to exercise my judgment in the matter?"

"Let there be open war between us, if you will," exclaimed Editha well-nigh driven to madness; "but give me that money—for it is *not mine*—it is merely entrusted to me—"

"This is absurd!" exclaimed the Earl "The money is sent to you—this note proves it—and once more I say that what is yours, is *mine*."

The Countess again sank back upon the sofa with reeling brain and bursting heart, while her husband, hastily securing the Bank-notes about his person was hurrying from the room, when he accidentally

dropped Emmerson's unsigned letter. His hand, was upon the door ere he perceived it; and at the same instant, swift as the eagle swoops upon its prey, did Gertrude bound forward and seize upon that letter. Then thrusting it into her bosom, she seemed to concentrate all the lustre of her fine dark eyes in order to fling one burning, scorching glance of hatred and of indignation upon the Earl.

For a moment he seemed inclined to tear the document from her; but suddenly changing his mind, he said, "After all, you are welcome to the letter, since I retain the Bank-notes. Without a signature and ambiguous in its wording as it is, it is valueless as a piece of evidence:"—then turning a look of sardonic triumph upon his wife, he said, "Your Ladyship exposed me last night, but I think you will agree that you are paying rather dear for it to-day. Were I not satisfied with the vengeance which accident has thus enabled me to wreck, I should at once take and turn this insolent lady's-maid of yours out of the house. As it is, with five thousand guineas in my pocket, I can afford to be generous."

Thus speaking, the Earl of Curzon strode out of the room; and when the door closed behind him, Editha and Gertrude remained gazing in speechless consternation upon each other.

CHAPTER CXXII.

ANOTHER SUM OF FIVE THOUSAND GUINEAS.

"What a dreadful calamity!" said Editha at length, a visible shudder passing through her form as if she had to deplore the sudden death of some very near relation.

"Dreadful indeed!" echoed the maid: "it seems scarcely credible—it appears like a horrible dream!"—then, after a brief pause she observed, "But fortunately I possessed myself of Mr. Emmerson's note: and drawing it forth from her bosom, she at once threw it into the fire.

"What is to be done?" asked Editha; utterly bewildered.

"Shall I go off at once to Mr. Emmerson and explain everything?" said Gertrude.

"Yes—that is the only alternative" answered the Countess. "But will he believe the tale? or will he regard it as a base subterfuge to cover an infamous cheat

on my part? Will he not fancy, in a word, that I am seeking to self-appropriate the money?"

"I must work upon his feelings to produce the contrary impression" said Gertrude; "I must speak to him of your love—your devotion towards him—and your despair at what has taken place."

"Be quick then, Gertrude—depart at once," said the Countess. "Mr. Emmerson leaves the City between four and five—and there is yet time."

The unhappy Editha hastened upstairs to her boudoir, there to ruminate in solitude upon the calamity which had just occurred, and to rack her brain with a thousand useless conjectures as to the cause which could possibly have led her husband to seize upon that parcel. In the meantime Gertrude sallied forth to pay Mr. Emmerson another visit in Nicholas Lane.

Two hours elapsed, during which interval the Countess of Curzon gave way to an infinite variety of disagreeable and bewildering reflections. To what end could this warfare with her husband possibly lead? At one moment she triumphed—at another she was forced to endure the most perilous defeats: and in the long run would she not be crushed altogether? The gloom deepened around her soul as these thoughts were forced upon her; and in acute suspense did she await Gertrude's return. It was half-past five when the abigail came back; and the moment she entered the boudoir, the expression of her countenance at once convinced Editha that she had failed in her mission.

"Have you seen him?" she said, in a quick voice which showed that suspense was agony.

"No, dear lady," answered Gertrude: "I have not seen Mr. Emmerson. Everything, is turning against us. Pressing business, transpiring all of a sudden, has compelled him to depart post-haste on a long journey. I saw his head clerk, Mr. Varian—that young man, you know, whom he has so generously taken back into his service——"

"Well, well—go on, for heaven's sake!" said Editha.

"Mr. Varian told me that Mr. Emmerson had received a letter between three and four o'clock—it was a letter from the Continent, I think he said—which compelled him to start off at once. The whole affair was so sudden that Mr. Emmerson had scarcely time to write even a note to his wife. Had I been half-an-hour earlier

I should have just arrived in time to see him ere he stepped into the post-chaise——”

“But when will he return?” asked Editha, still in an agony of suspense.

“Alas! dear lady,” replied Gertrude, “it is altogether uncertain. He told Mr. Varian that he should be absent at least ten days——”

“Good heavens!” said Editha, clasping her hands; “and in the meantime I may be ruined. “Oh the fatal folly of that tortuous and round-about plan of his to silence the villain Malpas!”

“It is useless repining,” said Gertrude. “Let us, with our usual courage, look the matter boldly in the face.”

“Well, I will do so,” said the Countess, assuming a forced composure. “It is quite clear, Gertrude, that something must immediately be done. Malpas is capable of any atrocity; and now that he has once begun to threaten, he will not leave me alone. Emmerson’s letter, which he wrote this morning in your presence, and of which you approved, has reached Malpas by this time: and he will of course expect to hear shortly from me. Where can I procure five thousand guineas? My sisters—all my relatives—are away from town at this moment——”

“I have it, dear lady!” suddenly exclaimed Gertrude. “Lord Sackville——”

“Oh! I could not possibly ask him such a thing,” cried the Countess, “Remember, he has not as yet received the crowning favour from me—and it would appear as if I were actually bargaining for the sale of myself——”

“No such thing!” rejoined Gertrude, impetuously; “every lady of rank either gives money to her paramour, or else receives money from him. Besides, in this frightful emergency which is better—to lay yourself under an obligation to Lord Sackville? or to stand the chance of annoyance, vexation, and exposure at the hands of “Colonel Malpas?” Moreover, continued Gertrude “now that Emmerson has written to tell the Colonel he has communicated the latter’s threats to you——”

“Yes—I understand,” said Editha; “the Colonel will be expecting some kind of communication from me. When first he was in prison he wrote to me—and I sent back his letters unread. Now he may avenge himself upon me——”

“And remember,” added Gertrude, “that inasmuch as the Earl appears resolved to open every letter and parcel

coming to the house, it may happen that Colonel Malpas will write to your ladyship and that his letter may fall into his lordship’s hands. If so, there would doubtless be grounds at once for separation and divorce; for depend upon it, the Colonel will not be delicate in his allusions to past affairs when once he does take up his pen to address your ladyship in the same threatening way he has already adopted in writing to Mr. Emmerson.

“Yes—I see all the perils of my position,” observed Editha: “and this Malpas must be silenced at any cost.”

“And at any sacrifice, my lady added Gertrude, emphatically. “There is consequently no alternative but to apply to Lord Sackville——”

“I shall never dare look him in the face to ask him such a thing,” said Editha, wringing her hands.

“Then entrust the matter to me,” exclaimed Gertrude. “Write his lordship a note, stating that you have the most urgent—the most imperative—and indeed the most cruel need for five thousand guineas; and I will take it myself to Carlton House.”

“But suppose that Sackville has not such a sum at his command?” observed Editha.

“Then he can procure it,” rejoined Gertrude, who never would allow herself to recognise the difficulties in her path if she could possibly see beyond them.

The Countess of Curzon sate down to her desk and penned a hasty note to Lord Sackville in the sense which Gertrude had suggested: and when it was duly folded and sealed, the indefatigable abigail sallied forth again and betook herself to Carlton House. But here we must leave her for a few minutes in order to see what was passing within the walls of that palatial residence.

It was now verging towards seven o’clock—Venetia was dining *tete-a-tete* with the Prince—and her husband, Lord Sackville, was entertaining Captain Tash also at a *tete-a-tete* dinner in his own room. The reader will remember how it was that the gallant captain had been led, in the afternoon, to pay his respects to Lord Sackville; and although Horace had no very high opinion of that gentleman he nevertheless could not help entertaining a grateful remembrance of the manner in which he had come forward to vindicate Venetia against the representations of Colonel Malpas. Lord Sackville had therefore received Captain Tash with an appearance of cordiality; and luncheon being

ordered, the gallant officer became so enamoured of the Madeira and Port that he did not offer to move till he had emptied a couple of decanters. Just then Horace received a message from Venetia to the effect that the Prince wished her to dine alone with him; and not having anything particular to do, he invited Tash to stay and pass the remainder of the day with him. Such a proposal was by no means to be refused; and as Robin had been consigned to the hospitable care of Lord Sackville's valet, the gallant officer found himself altogether placed in circumstances the most congenial to his sense of enjoyment. The reader may be well assured that he did as ample justice to the dinner served up in the evening as he had shown towards the lunch in the afternoon; and Horace happened to be in one of those humours when the rattling, off-hand, miscellaneous conversation of such a man as Tash was welcomed as the means of dispelling *ennui*.

The Captain, keeping in view the mission which he had received from the Marquis of Leveson, failed not to speak of all the pleasures, delights, and enjoyments of London life in the most rapturous terms; and he described various places of recreation and amusement with which Horace was previously unacquainted except by name. Tash likewise made his noble host understand that it was absolutely necessary for him to have an excellent stud of horses, in order to sustain the dignity of his position; and Horace, well knowing that his gallant friend was a good judge of horse-flesh, at once gave an order to procure a few thoroughbreds. After continuing in this strain for some time, the captain—who, by the bye, was drinking his wine out of tumblers, he having a mortal contempt for such "thimblefuls" as wine-glasses—launched forth into the most magniloquent praises of Lady Sackville; at length, slapping his noble entertainer familiarly upon the shoulder, exclaimed, "You possess a treasure of a wife, my lord—a veritable treasure, my lord! And mark—I, Rolando Tash, tell you so. If anybody dares deny it, I will flay him alive. My man Robin admires her—and he is no bad judge, let me tell you: and all the world admires her, which is of course very flattering for your lordship. But when I say that her ladyship is a treasure, I mean what I say. In fact—And here, my lord, I can't do better than drink my nineteenth tumbler of Port to her ladyship's health—in fact," continued Tash, having drained the capacious

glass, "her ladyship is a treasure of beauty and a treasure of wealth. Depend upon it that whatever money your lordship might require for your own purposes, her ladyship can obtain it——"

"What on earth do you mean!" demanded Horace, not knowing whether the Captain meant to allude to Venetia's somewhat equivocal position or not.

"Never do you mind, my lord, what I mean," answered the Captain, as he despatched his twentieth tumbler: "I mean what I say—and you may be assured that I know what I mean. Only just try the next time you want money, and ask her ladyship to be your banker. The fact is, she possesses a secret mine of wealth unknown to your lordship, and which I only discovered by accident. A little bird whispered it in my ears——"

At this moment a footman entered and made a whispered communication to Lord Sackville to the effect that a young female, who gave the name of *Miss Gertrude*, wished to see him immediately in the adjacent parlour. Apologising to Captain Tash on account of leaving him for a few minutes,—Lord Sackville hastened to the next apartment, where Gertrude put Editha's note into his hand. Horace immediately perused it: but the reader must not fancy that he was very much surprised at the request contained therein—for, as Gertrude had observed to her mistress, that was an age when every titled lady was either a lender or borrower in respect to her paramour. Besides, whist and faro were all the rage in fashionable life, and many ladies were such desperate gamblers that they lost or won thousands in the course of the year. It therefore instantaneously struck Lord Sackville that the Countess of Curzon had contracted one of those "debts of honour" (Oh! the vile prostitution of the term!)—which must be paid at once, and hence the interpretation of the cruel need which her ladyship experienced for the money. On hinting this idea to Gertrude, she hastened to confirm it,—adding that her mistress was in such a dreadful state of mind for fear of being disgraced by any delay in the payment of the debt, that she was well-nigh distracted.

"Distracted indeed!" exclaimed Horace, as he turned away from the abigail, and began walking in an agitated manner to and fro: for he himself felt distracted at being thus applied to for an amount which he had no means of procuring at the moment.

What on earth was he to do? Not for worlds would he refuse thus to befriend Lady Carzon: and yet he could not possibly see how he was to raise the money. Suddenly the extraordinary yet very significant remark of Captain Tash recurred to his mind. Could Venetia assist him?—had his wife really some peculiar resources unknown to him? It was scarcely possible. Being acquainted with all her previous history, he did not see how this could be. And yet Tash had spoken with the air of a man well assured of what he asserts. At all events there could be no harm in trying: the case was desperate—and Horace caught eagerly at any hope.

Bidding Gertrude wait a few minutes, Horace quitted the room and repaired to that part of the place in which the Prince Regent's own private apartments were situated. Waiting in an anteroom: he sent in a footman with a message to his wife to the effect that he wished to speak to her for a few minutes. It happened at the moment that the Prince, after a somewhat early dinner with Venetia, had drunk so copiously that he had just fallen asleep upon the sofa; and therefore his lovely mistress was enabled at once to come forth in compliance with her husband's summons.

"Is anything the matter, Horace?" she inquired, immediately perceiving that there was a certain uneasiness and agitation in his manner.

"My dear Venetia," he answered, "I wish to consult you as to what I am to do in a particular embarrassment which has just sprung up. A year or two ago—long before I was acquainted with you—I contracted a debt under peculiar circumstances. It was a debt of honour—and up to this moment I have never been asked for the money. Now it is suddenly demanded of me: and unless paid to-night or to-morrow morning, the person to whom it is due will be utterly and totally ruined. An exposure of his affairs will take place,—my name will be implicated—In fact, Venetia, it is serious—very serious."

"But how on earth, Horace, can I assist you?" she exclaimed.

"I do not know," he responded in an agitated manner. "But women are so ingenious—and you of all women possess such a readiness at expedients—"

"But is it really so very, very serious?" she demanded, looking him fixedly in the face.

"On my soul," he replied, trembling with uncertainty as to the result, "it is

most serious: and unless I can pay this amount, my character will be compromised to a frightful degree. Young in the peerage as we are, and having by our sudden rise excited so many jealousies, envies and hatreds, our position is a delicate one; and such an exposure would be most disastrous—most ruinous—"

"Well, Horace, console yourself," said Venetia. "Fortunately I have a little hoard from some private gifts of the Prince—However," she cried suddenly "I have not time now to enter into particulars. Go back to your wine and your guests whoever you may have with you—and in an hour come up to me in my boudoir. You shall then have the money."

"Ten thousand, thousand thanks, Venetia!" exclaimed Horace: then as he embraced her, he said, "If we are not the most devoted lovers in the world, or the most faithful and exemplary husband and wife, we are at all events the very best of friends."

"And that is perhaps better," answered Venetia. "But I must now return to the Prince—and in an hour you will come to me in my boudoir."

"They then separated. Horace went back to Gertrude, to tell her to wait an hour as he had sent for the money; and then returning to Captain Tash, he proceeded to question this gallant gentleman relative to the secret resources of Venetia. But Tash,—little suspecting, however, that accident had so speedily put Lord Sackville in the way of testing the experiment in the matter,—could be induced to say nothing more than that "what he said, he knew was to be relied on."

In the meantime Venetia, instead of returning to the Prince Regent, whom she had left snoring and half-drunk on the sofa, hastened up to her boudoir; and summoning Jessica, she hurriedly communicated her intention to that faithful dependant. Enveloping themselves each in a thick cloak, and putting on plain straw hats with ample veils, they prepared to sally forth. But previously Venetia opened her jewel-coffer and took off five of the pearls from the string which the Marquis of Leveson had given her. These she enveloped in a piece of paper and carefully secured in her bosom: then accompanied by Jessica, she issued from the palace by means of one of the private doors.

Taking a hackney-coach in Pall Mall, they proceeded direct to Albemarle Street; and on inquiring at Leveson house if the Marquis were at home, they were at once admitted into the mansion. Being shown

to a parlour on the ground-floor, they were almost immediately joined by the Marquis; and Venetia at once raising her veil, said to the nobleman, "When I spoke so triumphantly and so positively this morning in respect to the impossibility of ever needing to use you as my banker, I did not foresee what was to happen to-night."

"If your ladyship is about to present your cheques," said the Marquis, with ill-subdued delight and surprise, "you need make no apology. The drafts shall at once be honoured."

"I tender your lordship my best thanks," said Venetia, assuming an air of cold dignity, in order to prevent her from seeming completely humiliated. "This young person," she added, observing that the Marquis was looking at Jessica, who still retained the dark veil over her countenance, "is my confidential maid."

The nobleman bowed in courteous acknowledgment of this explanation: then drawing forth his pocket-book and taking out a quantity of notes, he said, "To what amount does my fair patroness propose to draw upon her most honoured and grateful banker?"

"To this amount," answered Venetia, producing the five pearls.

"'Tis but a trifle" observed the Marquis: and he then handed Venetia Bank-notes to the amount of five thousand guineas.

"Again I thank your lordship," she said; and drawing down her veil, took her departure—the nobleman accompanying her as far as the front door and handing her into the hackney-coach.

Venetia was not altogether ten minutes inside Leveson House upon the present occasion; and as she returned homeward in company with Jessica, she observed, "I most sincerely hope that this will be the last time I shall ever have occasion to set foot in that dwelling. An apprehension of covert treachery and dark mysterious danger sate heavy upon my heart the whole time."

Alighting from the hackney-coach in Pall Mall, Venetia and her confidential maid re-entered Carlton House;—and when Horace at the expiration of the hour, went up into his wife's boudoir, he found her seated quite alone, awaiting his presence—so that he little thought she had been compelled to sally forth during the interval in order to obtain the money which she now placed in his hand. Having duly reiterated his grateful thanks, he once

more left her in order to hasten and consign the amount to Gertrude's keeping; and the abigail, infinitely delighted at the success of her mission, sped back with a light step and a still lighter heart to Grosvenor Street.

The reader may imagine far better than we can possibly describe the joy of Lady Curzon at thus so easily obtaining a second sum of five thousand guineas; and early on the following morning the amount—together with the letter which the countess had penned in readiness, and with the contents of which the reader is already acquainted—was conveyed by the trustworthy Gertrude to the King's Bench. Delivering the parcel into the hands of a turnkey, she took her departure thence;—and never was drop of water more welcome to the Arab wanderer in the desert, than was this pecuniary succour to Colonel Malpas. He instantaneously sent for Mr. Emmerson's solicitor and coolly proposed to pay him three thousand guineas for his release: but the attorney, having already received an intimation from the money-broker relative to the Colonel's affair, and knowing therefore how he was to act, flatly refused to receive a single farthing less than the whole amount. Malpas, who was so heartily sick of imprisonment that he would have made any sacrifice to procure his liberty, accordingly handed over the entire sum to the solicitor, and was thus enabled to take his departure from the King's Bench.

But on issuing thence he found himself alone as if it were upon the wide world. He knew not what to do, or whither to go. It was true that he had a few guineas in his pocket: but when they were gone, how was he to obtain farther supplies? His wife's relatives had totally discarded him; and she herself had declared that she would never see him more. The circumstance of the terrible thrashing which had received from Captain Tash had got noised abroad at the time, together with a rumour that this punishment had been inflicted on him for having endeavoured to cheat the Prince Regent, the Marquis of Leveson, and others, out of a sum of six thousand guineas—so that every chance of finding his way back into society seemed distant enough. In plain terms, Colonel Malpas was in the unpleasant predicament of a man who found himself not only penniless but also "cut" by all the world; and therefore, on emerging from incarceration, it was natural enough that he should ask himself over and over again what he was to do.

He wandered into a tavern near the foot of Westminster Bridge, and ordering some refreshments, sat down to reflect upon his position; and he already began to think that it were much better to have kept the five thousand guineas and remained in prison, than to have come forth penniless. For a moment it struck him that he would write to Lady Curzon and demand a few hundred pounds on the pretext that it was rendering him no service to release him from prison and leave him destitute. But to attempt any farther extortion within a few hours after the display of such bounteous munificence on her part, was an infamy even too great for Colonel Malpas to contemplate seriously, unscrupulous and heartless though he were. But still recurred the question,—what was he to do?

In the midst of his bewilderment his eye casually fell upon a paragraph in a newspaper that lay before him; and in which some Court scribe had indulged in a flaming eulogium upon Lady Sackville, extolling her for so many charities, amenities, and estimable qualities, that if she had only possessed a tithe of them in reality she would have been a perfect angel. As the Colonel read this panegyric his thoughts were suddenly turned into a new channel. Venetia and assuredly generous-hearted; and moreover, she had risen to so high an eminence that she could afford to be magnanimous and forgiving. What if he were to write and implore her intervention in procuring for him the pardon of the Prince Regent for his past misconduct? If this Royal highness could only be induced to take him by the hand, all his former friends would flock around him again—he might get back into society, and still find means of pushing his way in the world.

The hope was a desperate one: but the man's position itself was desperate—and he could lose nothing by the trial. He accordingly proceeded to pen a most humble, contrite, and even grovelling letter to Lady Sackville—confessing himself a reptile deserving only to be trodden beneath her heel; but appealing to her generosity for pardon, and to her magnanimity for succour. He declared himself her slave, ready, to lick the dust at her feet—and willing to go to the ends of the earth, if he could serve her. In fine, he wrote just such a letter as might be expected from a sneaking, paltry coward, reduced to his last shifts, and compelled to have recourse to the meanest and most humiliating of expedients.

Having despatched the letter by a messenger to Carlton House, he remained at the tavern anxiously waiting for the reply. The emissary was absent for upwards of an hour, at the expiration of which time he returned with a verbal message to the effect that Lady Sackville would grant Colonel Malpas an interview between three and four o'clock in the afternoon.

The Colonel was positively astounded at his result of a proceeding adopted in utter desperation. He could scarcely believe that the messenger had delivered the verbal response aright. But the man declared that the message had been given him by a very smart and pretty-looking young damsel, having the appearance of a lady's maid; and the Colonel was therefore reassured against the probability of error.

To be brief, he repaired to Carlton House punctually at half-past three o'clock—and a footman immediately introduced him into a drawing-room where the brilliant Venetia was awaiting his arrival. Nothing could exceed the cold grandeur and icy magnificence of demeanour with which she received him; and she made him feel that she really regarded him as a wretched worm whom she forbore from trampling under foot merely because there was a way in which she could make him serviceable. The interview lasted for nearly an hour, during which Venetia explained her views to Colonel Malpas,—offering him a certain private mission to which she proposed to attach a liberal remuneration with a promise that if it were carried out successfully she would consider what more could be done in the Colonel's behalf. As a matter of course he cheerfully accepted the mission thus offered him, and in terms of grovelling adulation did he express his gratitude. Venetia listened to him with superb disdain: for even while she was thus giving him the means of subsistence, she made him feel that it was very far from being for his own sake, but simply because there were circumstances at the moment which thus accidentally enabled her to make use of him as a tool or instrument in the furtherance of her own mysterious purposes.

Having received a sum of money for his travelling expenses and immediate wants, Colonel Malpas took his leave of Lady Sackville; and with an hour he was on his way in a post-chaise for Dover.

In the evening of that same day the Earl of Curzon repaired to the Carlton House in obedience to a summons which

he had received from Venetia : and for upwards of an hour was he alone with her in earnest and serious deliberation. At the conclusion of the interview his lordship also took a post-chaise and set out on a journey to Dover.

CHAPTER CXXIII.

THE VILLA AT GENEVA.

THE reader must suppose three months to have elapsed since the occurrences which have just been relating : and the scene now changes to a beautiful villa-residence in one of the delightful suburbs of Geneva.

The house itself was spacious. The rooms on the ground-floor opened with windows reaching the ground, upon sloping lawns : and the casements of the upper storey were furnished with balconies filled with the choicest flowers. For though it was but the middle of the month of March and in England the winds blew bleak and cold, yet the season was all warmth, all brightness, and floral fragrance in the sunny south. The trees were covered with verdure—the gardens were gorgeous with flowers and nothing could more beautiful, nothing more picturesque than the villa-residence to which we have alluded, seated as it was upon a gentle eminence commanding a view of the lake, and surrounded by garden, and pleasure-grounds laid out in the most tasteful manner.

It was at this villa that her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales—better known to the masses in this country as the Princess Caroline—was passing a short time with her retinue. The injured wife of the Prince Regent, after visiting several towns in Italy and some of the most interesting scenery of Switzerland had suddenly taken it into her head to settle down in this secluded but charming retreat in the Genevese territory.

Her Royal Highness's suite was small, consisting altogether of only a dozen persons. There were six ladies-in-waiting, of whom Agatha, Emma, and Julia Owen were the three junior : the other three had been for some time in the household of the Princess and were devoted to her interests—but, as the reader is well aware, the Misses Owen were the trained spies, and secret emissaries of the conspirators who were leagued to accomplish the ruin of her Royal Highness. The principal equerry in attendance upon the Princess was the

Baron Bergami, with whom she had been acquainted in her youth at her father's Court in Brunswick, and for whom at that period it was supposed she had entertained some little affection. After an interval of nineteen years, circumstances had again thrown the Baron in her way, during her recent visit to Italy ; and hearing that he was poor even to actual distress, and had been very unfortunate, she at once took compassion upon him and offered him that situation which we now find him occupying, in her household. In addition to those members of her suite already mentioned, we must observe that there were three pages, a young lady acting as ' reader ' and secretary, and two or three other females, amongst whom was Mrs. Ranger. Such was her Royal Highness's retinue, which accompanied her on her travels ; but now of course there were the menial servants, in addition thereto at the villa—the entire household therefore consisting of upwards of twenty persons. The mansion was however large, having several detached buildings and outhouses at the back ; and it was thus enabled to accommodate so large an establishment.

It was on a lovely evening, in the middle of the month of March, 1815, that Emma Owen—the second of the sisters—issued forth from a side-door of the villa, and threading a shrubbery of evergreens, entered one of the beautiful gardens where exquisite specimens of statuary appeared amongst the natural glories of the scene. A dark scarf, negligently thrown over her shoulders, set off the whiteness of her skin to great perfection, and made her charms, which the low-bodied dress left much exposed, seem absolutely dazzling. Very beautiful indeed did she appear—for on her cheeks was the heightened bloom of expectation as she emerged from the shrubbery and flung a rapid glance around the garden. Then, as she beheld a gentleman suddenly spring over the boundary wall at the extremity, she affected to be terrified ; and turning suddenly back, she made a movement as if about to retrace her way towards the villa. Along the gravel walks did he bound, threading the elysian maze formed by the parterres of flowers ; and as Emma did not fly very speedily, he was in less than a minute by her side.

"My angel—no charmer !" he exclaimed seizing her hand and pressing it to his lips : "wherefore did you endeavour to avoid me ?"

"Oh ! because this is madness—perfect madness—to scale the wall," she answered, with an appearance of mingled alarm and

anger. "Besides, for what do you take me—or what can you think of me, that you adopt such means to seek my presence?"

"I take you for what you are," was the gentleman's response, as he still retained her hand in his own.—"one of the loveliest of your sex! And I have ventured to watch until you came for your wonted evening walk in the garden, so that I might seek this opportunity of throwing myself at your feet and declaring how much I love you. Oh! wherefore be thus cruel!" he exclaimed; as Emma endeavoured—or at least affected the endeavour—to extricate herself from the half-embrace in which he now held her.

"Unhand me, sir," she said: "and if you wish that proper explanations should pass between us, I am willing to grant you an opportunity for a few minutes—"

"Thanks—ten thousand thanks dearest lady!" exclaimed the gentleman. "That is all I require!"—then conducting her to a seat in a bower of roses, he said as he still retained her hand in his own, "To see you is to admire you—to know you is to love you: but. Ah! to be possessed of your love in return were a happiness beyond description! When first I beheld you—you remember it well—it was two months ago in the cathedral at Milan—I was instantaneously smitten with the power of your charms. Seizing the opportunity to explain the subject of some painting which you were regarding at the time, I introduced myself to your notice—"

"Think you, sir, that I do not recollect the incident full well," asked Emma. "I am no prude—there is no ridiculous affectation about me—and I not only remember how we first met at Milan, but likewise how you have since followed me from place to place until I arrived here with her Royal Highness three weeks ago."

"But you cannot say, Miss Owen," exclaimed the gentleman, "that there has been anything rude, uncourteous, or obtrusive in my conduct? Never have I ventured to accost you save when I observed that you were alone: never have I attempted to force myself upon your attention when you have been in attendance on her Royal Highness, or in company of the other ladies of her household."

"I am free to confess" said Emma, with one of those arch smiles which she knew so well how to assume, and which rendered her so truly bewitching—so dangerously captivating—"I am free to confess that

every word you are now uttering is truth itself. So far from accosting me when I have been with others you have invariably watched your opportunity to catch me when alone. If at Milan or at Turin I merely went out unattempted, the length of a couple of streets to purchase an article at a shop, you were immediately at my side—"

"Yes, dear young lady," interrupted her companion,— "to offer you my arm—to protect you against insult—defend you against danger—"

"Yes—and also to whisper certain love-nonsense in mine ears," continued Emma, with a gay laugh and mischievous look. "And it has been the same since we arrived at Geneva: whenever I have happened to be alone, behold the opportunity for your appearance! The day before yesterday, for instance, it was on yonder heights—last evening it was during a stroll along the shore of the lake—and now, when anxious to escape from the heated dinner-saloon and enjoy the fresh air of the garden—"

"Your tormentor again rushes into your presence," said her companion, with a smile irradiating his really very handsome countenance and showing his fine teeth.

"Yes—but in order to rush into my presence he scales a wall," exclaimed Emma, with an arch look which showed how very far she was from being angry.

"My angel—my adored one—for such indeed you are," exclaimed the gentleman, "can you look me in the face and declare that my presence here in this garden was altogether unexpected on the present occasion? When we parted yesterday on the shore of the lake, I ventured to express a wish and a hope that you would grant me another interview as speedily as possible: and then, with your own pretty mouth and in the melodious cadences of your sweet voice, did you hint the probability that you would be walking in the garden this evening. Thereupon I avowed my intention of laying in wait thus to catch you: and I do not recollect at the time that you gave utterance to anything in the shape of a negative."

"Because I could scarcely believe it possible that you would have the presumption thus to introduce yourself within the precincts of her Royal Highness's dwelling:—and as Emma thus spoke she again looked with a certain mischievous archness in her companion's face.

"You provoking creature," he exclaimed, flinging his arms about her neck and straining her to his breast: nor did she

withdraw her lips from the close pressure of his own. "There!—now I have punished you in a befitting way for the manner in which you have been talking to me. But after all, you do not seem to fancy that I am absolutely hideous?"

"Oh! what conceit on your part," exclaimed Emma; then as one of her beautiful white hands played almost involuntarily as it were with the light curling hair of the companion,—who, by the bye, was tall, slender, well-made, and good-looking,—she said, "I certainly do not consider you particularly ugly; and it is perhaps because your personal appearance is so much in your favour that I—like a silly weak-minded girl as I am—have allowed myself to be inveigled into a kind of romantic friendship for you——"

"Oh! then you admit this much?" exclaimed her companion, with one arm thrown about her waist and his left hand clasping hers.

"Well, I have made the admission," she said, smiling with a gay archness; "and I do not wish to recall it. But did we not just now say something about explanations?—and if so, let them commence at once. In the first place should you really wish this friendship of ours to continue, you will tell me your name: for you can scarcely fail to remember that notwithstanding the numerous occasions on which you have forced yourself as it were upon my presence, you have never once condescended to make me aware who it might be that thus considered me worthy of his persevering attentions?"

"True, dearest girl!" exclaimed her companion; "it was most remiss on my part. But will you not pardon me when I assure you that every time I find myself in your presence, I become so absorbed in the contemplation of your charms and drinking in the melody of your sweet voice, that I totally forges everything connected with myself. But now you remind me that I have indeed been most remiss; and I would not for the world have you imagine that I purposely studied the slightest concealment towards you."

"Doubtless, then," said Emma, this long preface will herald the revelation of your name?"

"Have you ever heard of Colonel Malpas?" inquired her companion, with a transitory look of uneasiness as to the impression that his words might make upon the young lady.

"Yes," she exclaimed: "I have assuredly heard of him as one of the gay companions of his Royal Highness the

Prince Regent. But for the last six months I have been away from England, and therefore unacquainted with all that has been going on in the fashionable world at home. But are you Colonel Malpas?"

"I am," replied this gentleman, well pleased to hear that this fair companion was so much in the dark as to home occurrences.

And here we may observe that the Colonel had shaved off his moustache; and with his countenance slightly browned by the warmth of the sunny south, he had lost that air of a drawing-room officer which was wont to distinguish him. He had moreover to a certain extent got rid of the affected drawl in his voice; and thus, possessing a very handsome person and elegant manners, he was but too well calculated to make an impression upon any young female who was either tenderly sensitive or else fervidly licentious. Of this latter description was Emma Owen; and thus was it that the assiduities of Colonel Malpas had from the very first proved so welcome to her, that she had already made up her mind that if he should prove bold and daring the resistance she might offer would not be of too desperate a character. Besides, Emma had another reason for encouraging the Colonel—a reason altogether unconnected with her own sensual passions, but having reference to the part which she had to perform in carrying out the views of the conspirators against her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales.

"And you are Colonel Malpas?" she said, gazing with a kind of subdued tenderness upon her companion: then as a sudden idea seemed to strike her, she said with altering voice and overclouding look. "But if I mistake not, I have heard of a Mrs. Malpas—and therefore you are married?"

"Yes—unfortunately I am," answered the Colonel, who was playing his own part quite as well as Emma enacted hers: and calling to his aid the most impassioned air he could possibly assume, he said, "Yes—'tis true—alas! too true—that I am married. But married to whom? To one who never possessed my heart, and who never loved me. It was for her gold that I offered her my hand: it was for my social position she accepted it. A union, begun in selfishness could not end in love. But I need not dwell upon this unhappy marriage of mine: suffice it to say, that I am separated from my wife. She has returned to her friends—and I am as it were my own master once again. Sated for the time

with the pleasures and enjoyments of the fashionable world, I have come to wander upon the Continent for change of scene and variety of recreation. But little did I think that this visit of mine to southern Europe would turn the very spring tide of my life into a new channel!—little did I think that I was destined to meet one whose image has become indelibly stamped upon my heart! Oh! dearest Emma, hitherto there has been much lively discourse between us—much jocular and *badinage*:—and indeed your archness is so amiable, and your most mischievous looks are so often the most seductive as they are ever the most killing, that it were a pity to implore you to be serious. But serious we must nevertheless be, while I declare solemnly and sacredly that I love you!”

“But you are married—you are married?” exclaimed Emma, deeming it right to affect a temporary prudery, because a too speedy surrender under the circumstances would, she thought, stamp her character with unpardonable levity in the estimation of her companion: but still, though she seemed to give vent to that ejaculation with a kind of inward anguish, she did not withdraw herself from the half-embrace in which the Colonel retained her.

“Because I am married, dearest girl,” he whispered with all the appearance of deep emotion, “it is no reason wherefore I should not love you. You are beautiful—you are fascinating—and I have no power over volition. Would that I could rend asunder the bond which chains me to that destiny of marriage! But I cannot—and while offering you a heart that never loved before, and that will ever be most tenderly devoted and attached, I am unable to say that my hand accompanies it. If you have no love for me in return, you can of course, without a pang and without remorse, abandon me to disappointment and despair. But if you do in the slightest degree reciprocate that passion which I experience, you will sacrifice all and everything to such a feeling.”

“What mean you?—what mean you?” asked Emma, whose strong passions were already influenced by the contact in which she was placed with her handsome companion.

“I mean, dearest,” he replied, drawing her still more closely towards him, and venturing upon bolder dalliances than he had as yet dared to attempt,—“I mean that if we are to be happy together, you must make up your mind to the omission

of that ceremony which society has ordained to be performed in a church, but which nevertheless has no power of binding hearts, however indissolubly it may unite hands. I mean,” continued Malpas, still more plainly developing the detestable but hacknied sophistry of every man who tempts a woman to her undoing,—“I mean dearest, that you must dispense with the aid of a clergyman to unite us—and that instead of formally and ceremoniously declaring yourself to be mine in the presence of man, you will consent to become so in the view of heaven.”

“Oh! what power is there in your words,” murmured Emma, growing as it were to his breast against which her bosom rose and fell with voluptuous heavings: yet it was not any magic persuasion in the Colonel’s language, but the rising excitement of her own devouring passion, that was now melting her into soft and sensuous yielding.

“Dearest, dearest Emma!” said the Colonel, pressing his lips to hers and experiencing the thrill of ecstasy which was conveyed by the soft ardour of her caresses: then, after a long pause, he said, “To-night, dearest Emma, you must admit me into the villa?”

“Oh! no—no—I dare not!” she murmured, but in a manner which showed that she meant to yield to a little further persuasion.

“Ah! then you do not love me,” he exclaimed, and still he pressed her more closely in his arms, in order to sustain that frenzy of the passions which he saw was influencing her and which made her whole frame tremble and vibrate.

“It is cruel of you thus to accuse me,” she said, nestling still closer if possible in his embrace: and as through the arbour of roses her countenance caught the last beams of the setting sun, its expression was that of a languor so softly sensuous, so bewitchingly wanton, that Malpas was encouraged to seek the crowning bliss then and there.

But as he thus sought to make her entirely his own, a scintillation of prudence flashed up in Emma’s mind, even amidst the delicious agitation of those desires which were well-nigh indomitable: and suddenly recollecting that this was the hour when the Princess and the ladies of her suite were wont to walk in the gardens, she so far resisted the present daring endeavours of the Colonel as to promise that if he would leave her now he should receive admission to her chamber at a later hour when night drew her veil upon

the scene. Then, in low soft whispers—interrupted by frequent kisses, both given and received,—did Emma explain to her lover how he was to proceed between eleven and twelve that night in order to gain her room without fear of observation.

They then separated—Colonel Malpas once more scaling the wall of the enclosure, and Emma Owen taking two or three turns up and down a secluded gravel walk, in order to regain her composure ere she joined the Princess and her suite in their evening stroll through the gardens.

CHAPTER CXXIV.

THE SECRET EXPEDITION.

In the wall at the back part of the spacious grounds belonging to the villa, was a door opening upon a narrow road, which led for about a quarter of a mile through some fields stretching up to the verge of the city of Geneva: and it was about half-past ten o'clock, on the same evening of which we have been writing that two female figures stole forth from that garden door.

The silver moon rode high in the heavens, attended by countless myriads of stars—like a virgin-queen with her courtly galaxy of maidens; but a chill breeze, coming from the mountains and passing over immense lake, would have been of itself a sufficient reason to explain wherefore those two females were so well muffled up in ample cloaks. It was, however, no reason wherefore they should be so carefully veiled, and why on issuing forth they should cast such quick and anxious glances around, as if fearful of being observed. Indeed, it was evident enough that they had now quitted the villa for no ordinary purpose of enjoying a ramble in the silence, the moonlight, and the loneliness of that hour; but they had some secret and important business on hand.

"The coast is clear, Agatha," said Mrs. Ranger—for she indeed was one of the females thus cloaked and veiled, and the eldest Miss Owen was the other. "Come—let us be quick. But your eyes are better than mine; do you see anybody approaching?"

"No—not a soul," answered Agatha. "But stop one moment: I must lock the gate and take the key with me. Heavens! how my hand trembles. I positively feel as if I were about to commit some heinous crime."

"Tis cold—'tis the night air," said Mrs. Ranger. "You must not give way to idle fears or gloomy presentiments——"

"But you tell me," said Agatha, whose teeth chattered audibly, "that the house to which we are going is situated in one of the most secluded quarters of Geneva——"

"The terror implied by this remark is foolish, Agatha," said Mrs. Ranger, "No one will molest us—there is no danger. The police regulations of Geneva are excellent, and crime is scarcely heard of. Besides, if I am courageous enough to venture thus by night into a lovely quarter for *your* sake, surely you can conquer this repugnance——"

"Pardon me, my dear friend," said Agatha: "for a good friend indeed have you been to me! Without your aid and advice I should never have been able thus to have concealed my position——"

"Oh, it is simple and easy enough!" answered Mrs. Ranger, as she and Agatha proceeded along the narrow road together, in the direction of Geneva. "I do not mind telling you, my dear girl, that I have had some little experience in these matters in my lifetime; and more than one young lady of high birth, rank, and title, has been indebted to me for concealing her shame—I beg your pardon, my dear, I did not mean any imputation—concealing her position, I meant, until almost within a week or two of the crisis. I was once companion to a widow-lady of high rank, who had an only daughter—a very beautiful girl, but the strength of whose passion was insuperable. She was engaged to be married to a young nobleman temporarily absent in the colonies: but in the meantime she could not resist the temptation of intriguing with a youthful foot-page in the household. Dear me!" continued Mrs. Ranger, "he was quite a boy—not more than seventeen or eighteen; but nevertheless the result was that the young lady found herself in a way to become a mother. I soon penetrated her secret; and she gratefully gave me her confidence. Fortunate for her was it that she did so; for I enabled her to conceal her position up to within two days of her confinement. Then she quitted home upon some excuse already arranged—and returned in a fortnight, looking a *little* delicate and interesting. It is true, but without an appearance to excite her mother's suspicion as to what had happened. Three months afterwards the young nobleman came home—they were married—and at

the present moment they are as happy as the day is long."

"And what became of the child?" asked Agatha, with no mere passing interest in the question, because the subject came very nearly and somewhat painfully home to her own feelings.

"Oh! the child," observed Mrs. Ranger carelessly; "a gipsy woman consented to adopt it on condition of receiving fifty pounds."

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Miss Owen with a shudder, which now arose from a tremor at the heart's core, and not from the influence of the night air: "is it possible that the young mother could have shown such heartlessness?"

"Where was the alternative, my dear?" asked Mrs. Ranger with all the cool unconcern of one who was hardened in iniquity. "It was not likely that I, as the young lady's adviser and confidante, should have allowed a chance of that child sooner or later discovering the secret of its birth, and becoming in the hands of unprincipled persons a means of extortion—"

"But in this present case, my dear madam," said Agatha, grasping Mrs. Ranger with convulsive violence by the arm, as they continued their way along the lonely road: "in this present case—"

"What do you mean?—in *your* case?" asked Mrs. Ranger. "There! I nearly slipped over a stone! Dear me! what a wretched road! But look, Agatha—from this point how beautiful appears the lake at a distance! Does it not seem like an inland sea?"

"My dear Mrs. Ranger," cried the young lady, "do for heaven's sake talk to me upon the subject this is now uppermost in my thoughts! Pray do not show such callousness. I am entirely in your hands—entirely at your mercy. I have submitted to your advice in all things—"

"Well, my love—and have I not given you the best possible counsel? Here you are, near the end of your eighth month—and your appearance is such as to preclude the possibility of suspicion. Besides myself and your sister Emma, not a soul is acquainted with your secret."

"Yes—Julia has discovered it," observed Agatha.

"Well, I suppose it was your own fault," exclaimed Mrs. Ranger: "and if she discovered it, it was because you must have allowed her to do so?"

"Oh! certainly," said Agatha; "and I rather wished her to know it. At first I had concealed my position from her because

I did not think her ideas were *quite* so far advanced as those of Emma. But after the description which she gave us of the artifices and stratagems she practised under the guise, of *Laura Linden* upon the self-styled Jocelyn Loftus, I did not think it necessary to have any secret from her."

"And you were right," observed Mrs. Ranger. "But there is prudence in being cautious and guarded at first. For instance, your mother and yourselves were quite right in not initiating me fully, at the commencement, into the real object of your appointments about the person of the Princess. But as circumstances developed themselves and it became necessary for me to know everything, you see how useful I have been."

"Useful indeed!" exclaimed Agatha: "but to me especially have your services been valuable. Ah! a few months ago when it first struck me that my amour with the Prince Regent would not be without certain consequences, I treated the matter lightly enough: and I remember laughing over it with Emma in Paris. But as time wore on, the affair seemed to acquire a certain degree of seriousness—"

"Such things are always serious with young girls who are in their first scrape," said Mrs. Ranger. "I dare say it will go the round with your two sisters. Here is Emma with some unknown lover dangling at her heels—and Julia with the Earl of Curzon making fierce and violent love to her, also on the sly—But, by the bye, has Emma yet learnt the name of her innamorato?"

"No—I think not yet," answered Agatha impatiently. "She told me something about it this evening; but I had not time to listen to her then—and we therefore postponed the conversation. But pray, my dear Mrs. Ranger, do let me bring your mind back to the question which I asked you ere now—"

"Ah! I recollect," exclaimed the woman who was not a Hecate of iniquity but was as heartless as she was vile. "You were talking to me about the expected babe—*your* babe—and you really seemed as if you already experienced some of that maudlin, mawkish, sickly feeling which reads all very pretty in romances and novels, and which is called the prompting of maternal instincts: but let me tell you there is very little of it in the fashionable world—"

"Nevertheless," observed Agatha, with a sort of gasping of the breath, "I must candidly admit that I *do* feel much more

than I ever thought I should;—and though of course anxious—yes, deeply, profoundly anxious—to get through this painful ordeal as tranquilly as possible, and without suspicion—much less exposure—I cannot altogether divest myself of a yearning to acquire the assurance that the innocent offspring of this amour will not be altogether abandoned—deserted—uncared for—”

“Don’t be alarmed, Agatha—and don’t be childish,” interrupted Mrs. Ranger. “Am I not about to introduce you to the worthy doctor whom I have selected to conduct this business throughout?—and will you not now have an opportunity of learning from his lips what kind of an arrangement I have made? You ought rather to lavish thanks upon me, than convey anything like a remonstrance or reproach, even by implication. Think you, my dear, that I found out Dr. Maravelli without trouble, and without a considerable exercise of that ingenuity wherein I may be said to excel? As a matter of course—dwelling as I am under the roof of her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales—I could not go about openly and publicly asking after a discreet doctor who would engage to do certain services on specific conditions. Had I been thus imprudent, all Geneva would have rung with the scandal by this time, and the common report would be that one of her Royal Highness’s ladies was in a way that rendered the services of an accoucheur shortly needful. No—no, my dear girl,” continued the vain, conceited, and garrulous Mrs. Ranger: “I do not commit myself in so silly a manner. I knew the value of caution and prudence in this affair as well as in any other that I ever undertook. Accordingly, it was only by dint of cunning inquiries, stealthily pursued—catching a hint in one quarter and following it up in another—then pursuing the subject elsewhere—and so on,—it was only, I say, by these means that I at length obtained the information I sought: namely, the abode of a doctor who is sufficiently clever to be trusted in respect to his skill and sufficiently discreet to be trusted in respect to his honour. Moreover, it was necessary that he should be sufficiently ductile and tractable to induce him to submit to any conditions without asking a single question—and sufficiently needy or else avaricious to induce him to enter heart and soul into the entire business for the sake of the handsome reward held out. Such was the man I had to find—I, a comparative stranger at Geneva! Nevertheless aided by

my perfect knowledge of the tongue, guided by my discretion, and encouraged by my innate spirit of perseverance—I succeeded;—and in Dr. Maravelli are comprised all the qualifications which I have enumerated. Indeed he is a most valuable personage—But here we are at the entrance of the lane leading to his house.”

“Lane indeed!” murmured Agatha, recoiling for a moment in alarm from the deep shade of the dismal, narrow, cut-throat looking street, or rather alley, the mouth of which they had just reached.

For while Mrs. Ranger was delivering herself of the long harangue which we have just recorded, she and her young companion had threaded the fields in safety and now reached the city; but so narrow was the alley into which Mrs. Ranger was about to lead the way, that no ray of the pure cold moonlight could penetrate down into the darkness of its shades.

“Good heavens, Agatha!” said Mrs. Ranger, perceiving that her companion stopped short: “what are you afraid of?”

“Afraid!” responded Miss Owen, her teeth again chattering audibly: “’tis enough to make any one afraid to think of penetrating into this dreadful neighbourhood where there is not a lamp to light the street—no, nor even a candle flickering from a window. And talking of being afraid, how is it that you, whom I have seen at times so nervous—especially about robbers when we have been travelling—”

“Nervousness, my dear, is a fashionable luxury to which I give way either as a pastime for myself,” responded Mrs. Ranger, “or else as a means of making other people uncomfortable when I see them too happy. But I can put off my nervousness just as easily as I can a gala dress when the particular occasion for wearing it is over. Indeed, I can always pump up my courage to a degree commensurate with circumstances. And now Agatha, are you going to be outdone by me in respect to presence of mind?”

“But this street—or rather this lane,” said Agatha, still hanging back, “is so dark, it seems as if we were about to plunge into some unknown cavern.”

“Oh! nonsense—you have been reading some dreadful romance. I have been here before more than once, to see Dr. Maravelli, and already know every inch of the way.”

Miss Owen could make no farther remonstrance, and accordingly suffered herself to be led onward into the pitch-dark lane by Mrs. Ranger. But still she

walked as if every moment expecting either to fall into some yawning gulf, or to be seized upon by some hand thrust forth from the houses which they were skirting : for the truth is that Agatha, though really lacking not the average amount of feminine courage, was in the usual nervous and sickly state arising from her condition, and in the influence of which was immensely aggravated by the almost killing means she adopted to conceal her position. We have already stated, in an early chapter of this work, that Mrs. Ranger was a perfect mass of counterfeits and frauds in person as well as in mind—a shadow of mere skin and bone—plumped up into goodly proportions by all kinds of succedaneous means and artificial contrivances : and thus a hag who knew so well how to change the outward configuration of her own form, could not possibly have been at a loss to devise means of enabling Agatha to model her shape to temporary circumstances. But as a matter of course the unfortunate girl had to submit to a degree of compression that was in itself a positive crucifixion ; and this incessant torture from morning till night had not failed to produce very powerful effects upon her nervous system. Hence the terror with which she was really inspired, and not a little of which was assumed, as she threaded the long lane where Mrs. Ranger was now guiding her.

At length they beheld a light feebly glimmering in the distance, and resembling a lamp at the extremity of a long vault.

"That is our destination," said Mrs. Ranger, in an encouraging voice.

But Agatha scarcely felt cheered by the announcement—for the light looked feeble and dim as if burning in the chamber of the dead ; and attenuated as the poor young lady's mind was, it cannot be wondered if she experienced all kinds of dread presentiments and supernatural influences stealing over her. It even seemed as if Mrs. Ranger herself were some evil genius leading her to destruction ; and the very sounds of their footfalls, gentle though the tread of ladies is, sounded through the stupendous silence of the night dread and terrible to her ears.

At length, just as Agatha's terrors were so increasing upon her that she felt as if she must cry out, they reached a gateway over which the light was burning in the form of a dull oil lamp that only just rendered the outlines of a sombre-looking house discernible amidst the darkness. The building was not large, but certainly had a gaol-like appearance ; and when the

door was opened by an old woman and Agatha was led by Mrs. Ranger into a vestibule, or hall, of dark-coloured wood elaborately carved, it seemed to the young lady as if she were entering the precincts of a church. A chill more icy than any she had this night experienced, struck to the very marrow of her bones ; and when a low and deeply-set door opened from the side of the hall, showing a light within as feebly glimmering as the lamp outside, Agatha really fancied that it was the interior of a vault thus suddenly revealed to her. But at the same instant that doorway was darkened by the appearance of a thin, pale, keen-eyed individual, of middle age, and whose black costume denoted the physician. The first glance thrown upon him at once created the impression that he was a clever man, but an unprincipled one—a man who would as soon take a life as save it, and as readily administer a cup of poison as the balm of anodyne, provided the murderous employer's bribe was greater than the victim-patient's fee.

"Walk in, ladies," he said assuming as courteous a tone as possible, and accompanying it with two or three low bows. "I was expecting you according to appointment. You may retire, Mavolta."

This intimation was addressed to the old woman who had opened the gate, and who now withdrew accordingly—while Agatha, accompanied by Mrs. Ranger, entered the place where the lamp was burning, and which was a little parlour fitted up in a manner so sombre as to wear quite a funeral appearance. The doctor however hastily made a motion as if about to light another lamp ; but Mrs. Ranger at once said in a significant tone. "Spare yourself that trouble, sir : did I not charge you when I last saw you, that if I brought with me a certain lady to-night, you would have only the faintest light burning in the room where you received us ?"

"And have I not fulfilled your commands, my unknown but most liberal patroness ?" exclaimed the doctor ; "and if for a moment I mechanically prepared to light another lamp, it was because your companion seemed to hang back as if afraid of penetrating into the gloomy obscurity of this place."

"Thanks for your kind intention ! but, it is unnecessary," returned Mrs. Ranger.

It now struck Agatha wherefore so feeble a lamp was flickering in the room : it was evidently a precaution insisted upon by Mrs. Ranger, in her previous interviews with the doctor, in order to prevent him

from having the slightest chance of penetrating with his eagle eyes through the veils which his visitants wore.

This, I presume," said Maravelli, pointing towards Agatha, "is the lady concerning whom you, madam," and he turned towards Mrs. Ranger, "have spoken to me?"

"It is so," responded the vile woman thus addressed. "As I have already told you, doctor, my companion is most anxious to assure herself beforehand that every arrangement has been well settled and agreed upon between you and me for the coming event in which she, poor thing! is destined to be the principal actress."

"I am most happy thus to form the acquaintance of one who is to be my patient," said the doctor,—"that is, so far as an acquaintance is to remain unseen and the name unknown."

"Those are the conditions," observed Mrs. Ranger; "and I will repeat the rest in my companion's presence to satisfy her mind not only that I have made the various arrangements which I have already explained to her, but that you, doctor, understand those arrangements exactly as I have proposed them."

"Proceed," said Agatha in a low tone: but her fears were now dissipating, and she began to perceive that she had been the prey of unfounded alarms.

"In the first place," resumed Mrs. Ranger, "I have proposed that you, Dr. Maravelli, shall—when the term for this lady's accouchement approaches—hold yourself in readiness to be fetched at a moment's warning to attend upon her—that you will consent to be conducted blindfold to the place of destination—that you will remain blindfold within its walls—"

"Unless," said Maravelli, "the life of the patient should be in a predicament calculated to set aside all considerations of precaution, in which case I must act, according to circumstances."

"Precisely so," observed Mrs. Ranger. "But suppose that all goes on well—as we may hope and trust—you will then remain blindfold at the house during the short time your services may be required; and you will come away blindfold afterwards. Moreover, you pledge yourself most solemnly and most sacredly—as a man and as a gentleman—that whatever may transpire, you will avail yourself of no circumstance to obtain a glimpse of this lady's countenance?"

"Agreed!" exclaimed Maravelli: "and since you have already given me a right

noble fee in anticipation, and have promised me a future recompense on equally liberal terms, I have no wish to prove treacherous."

"The next portion of our agreement," continued Mrs. Ranger, "is that the child, should it survive——"

"Ah!" interrupted the doctor, his countenance suddenly assuming a look diabolically sinister—"then it is resolved that the child *may* live if it can?"

"Oh! was the contrary ever mooted?" exclaimed Agatha, the horrible comprehension of the man's meaning flashing to her mind.

"Don't be silly, my dear," said Mrs. Ranger impatiently. "Dr. Maravelli has only treated the matter in a business-like point of view. Besides, on the Continent they are not quite so particular as they are in England. It is therefore agreed," she continued, "that if the child lives it is to be brought hither immediately after its birth, by you, doctor—and to be duly entrusted by you to certain persons of good character, though humble means, who will rear the child tenderly and properly. And in consideration thereof, the said persons are to receive twenty-five louis d'or,* annually. Lastly, be it observed that I have already placed in your hands, doctor, a retaining fee of fifty louis d'or; and a farther fee—of the same amount is to be paid you on the occasion when your services, which are thus retained, shall have been duly rendered."

"You have stated the case, madam, with the same precision in which I have already agreed to every one of its details. Save and except," continued Dr. Maravelli "that you have omitted to specify how the annual stipend of twenty-five louis d'or is to be paid for the maintenance of the child."

"Through your own bankers," said Mrs. Ranger; "as you will undertake to keep an eye upon the child—so that should it live and its parents at any time be desirous of claiming it, the wish may be at once gratified by application to you."

"These are the conditions," observed the doctor; "and I on my part consent to them all. I hope that my fair patient, who has listened to this discourse, is satisfied?"—and he turned with a sort of sycophantic courtesy towards Agatha who liked his manner as little as might be.

"But ere she had time to give any answer, a bell was heard to ring in the hall; and the doctor, as if seized with a

* £ 20 Sterling.

sudden uneasiness, started from his chair—listened attentively—then sate down again, trying to look composed—and then once more sprang from his seat with increasing restlessness.

"Excuse me for a few minutes," he said. "It is the gate-bell—and I think I can guess—"

Then, without saying any more, he bowed to the two veiled ladies and abruptly quitted the room.

"Something is wrong—I do not like his manner—what can it be?" said Agatha, in a hasty whisper, and now speaking to Mrs. Ranger in English; for all the conversation with the doctor had been carried on in the French language.

"Oh! 'tis nothing," answered Agatha's companion in the same hushed and subdued tone. "You can judge full well, by all he has undertaken for us, that he is not excessively nice or particular; and it may be he is now receiving some visitors on an errand belonging to the same species, though perhaps not precisely of the same form or fashion as our own."

"Hush!" said Agatha, whose terrors sharpened all her faculties: "there are voices whispering outside—and, Oh! the doctor has left the door ajar! Doubtless 'twas in his agitation—for agitated he assuredly was: and therefore I do not think that it was any ordinary visitor he was expecting, or any detail of his wonted routine of business that he fancied himself called upon to transact. Hush!" again whispered Agatha: and impelled by an irresistible curiosity, she approached the door to listen.

"How can you be so foolish?" exclaimed Mrs. Ranger, who however, somewhat catching the infection of her young companion's fears, rose up from her seat and joined her at the door.

And now both of them listened with suspended breath to catch the slightest word or sound that might reveal the mystery of the doctor's recent agitation and of the scene—whatever it were—that was now passing in the hall.

"You are full early to-night, Kobolt," said Maravelli, in a voice which, though subdued, nevertheless reached the ears of the two ladies.

"It is not always easy to pick and choose one's own time," answered a rough voice: "and we fishers of men must take home the booty that our nets bring up as soon as caught—or else 'tis apt to turn putrid:"—and the fellow indulged in a coarse chuckle which sounded hideous and ominous through the hall.

"Hush! hush! I have patients *there*," said the doctor. "But whom have you in your company?"

"Hernani the Italian, and Walden the Switzer," was the response, again given in the rough voice which had before spoken and which no doubt belonged to the individual whom the doctor had addressed Kobolt. "Here they are, getting the *fish* in out of the cart. Come now, dame Mavolta—bring the light nearer. There! down with it upon the floor, comrades—and then you can be off to get the cart away back to the shed. But of course you will mind what answers ye give the police if ye happen to encounter them."

"Aye, aye," replied two other voices—most probably those of Hernani and Walden. "But here's the fish:"—and almost at the same instant Agatha and Mrs. Ranger heard something fall, like a heavy inert mass, upon the stone pavement of the hall; and the sound struck upon their ears dull and ominous, as if it were that of a corpse—making their blood run cold and their limbs tremble.

Fain would they have raised their veils and peeped forth from the parlour-door to clear up the horrible suspicion which had arisen in their minds, and thus relieve themselves of the fearful uncertainty that had seized upon them. But the doctor might return every moment:—he was but a few yards distant on the other side of that door, which they dared not open an inch wider lest it should grate on its hinges and betray their eaves-dropping.

"Now then, comrades, be off!" said the hoarse voice of Kobolt. "I will remain to help the doctor lift his prize to an inner room, and receive the gold pieces. In half-an-hour I will join you at our usual place of meeting."

"All right," responded the two voices which had previously given utterance to brief monosyllables; and the front door was then heard to open and close gently.

"Now be quick," said the doctor in a sharp impatient tone. "Let us clear this away—or those who are waiting for me will begin to consider my absence most extraordinary."

With a still more poignant curiosity and a still keener attention, if possible, did Agatha and Mrs. Ranger continue to listen inside the parlour; and now upon their ears slowly crept a sound as if that same heavy object which they had previously heard thrown in the hall, was being dragged over the stone floor.

"Be quiet, fool that you are!" said the doctor angrily. "We must lift it, I tell

you! The noise can be heard! Lift it, I say!"

"And then, as Agatha and Mrs. Ranger staggered back to their seats, overcome by the force of horrible suspicions now reduced almost to a certainty, they heard the quick footsteps of Maravelli and Kobolt retreating along the hall with the peculiar tread of men carrying something awkward and heavy between them. An inner door then opened and shut—and all was still.

"Heavens! what is the meaning of this?" murmured Agatha, who felt as if she were about to faint. "Terrible thoughts are agitating in my brain!"

"Terrible indeed!" said Mrs. Ranger, her whole form shivering with a cold shudder. "But we must compose ourselves—we must collect our courage—we must not let the doctor think we have been spying his actions. There! I will shut the door close!"

Thus speaking, she rose from her seat and secured the door gently:—then hastening back to Agatha's side, she said in a low and rapid voice, "For heaven's sake! subdue your emotions. We must not let him suspect that we have even caught the faintest idea of this scene. Besides, all is settled between him and us—and we will take our departure the moment he returns."

Scarcely had Mrs. Ranger finished speaking, when Marvelli re-entered the parlour; and by the rapid glance which he threw upon his two veiled visitants, it was apparent enough that he sought to ascertain whether they had moved from their seats since he quitted the room. But inasmuch as the dark veils completely concealed their countenances from his view,—and there were no other appearances to cause him to suspect that they were labouring under any peculiar emotion,—the doctor evidently felt reassured upon the subject.

"Pardon my rudeness, ladies," he immediately said, "in having thus left you alone for even so short a space as five or six minutes. And now permit me to offer some slight refreshment—a glass of wine and a biscuit—which indeed I have already ordered my housekeeper to bring in."

"We thank you, doctor, for your kindness," said Mrs. Ranger, rendering her voice as composed as possible: "but we must take our departure promptly. I do not know that we have anything more to say: the bargain is struck—all the arrangements are well understood——"

"And the most perfect secrecy shall be maintained," added Maravelli. "Permit me, ladies, to light you through the hall."

And officiously throwing open the parlour door, he allowed them to pass forth. But as he followed close behind with the lamp in his hand, the looks of Mrs. Ranger and Agatha, piercing through the thick folds of their veils, were instinctively flung upon the stone door of the hall: and with a kind of shuddering recoil did they observe a long wet mark upon that pavement near the entrance, as of some bulky object saturated with water had been thrown down and then partially dragged along, and the wet had afterwards been hurriedly mopped up.

Mrs. Ranger felt Agatha stagger against her: but in a quick significant tone she said, "Take my arm, love:"—and the young lady, instantaneously made aware of the necessity of maintaining her presence of mind, shook off as well as she was able the horrible sensations that had suddenly seized upon her. The next moment the front door was opened—the threshold was crossed—and wishing the doctor good night, the two ladies once more emerged into the long dark alley, which, now seemed, if possible, more dismal than when they first entered it half-an-hour previously.

"It was however a relief unspeakable both to Agatha and Mrs. Ranger to emerge into the fresh air from the atmosphere of the doctor's house, which for the last few minutes of their sojourn there had appeared to be fetid with the odour of the dead; and they retraced their way to the villa at a pace too rapid to afford opportunity for much connected discourse.

CHAPTER CXXV.

ANOTHER SCENE IN THE GARDEN.

IT was about a week after the incidents just related—and again, at the hour of sunset must we look into the spacious grounds attached to the villa-residence on the outskirts of Geneva. There, in one of the most secluded nooks of the enclosure, shall we behold Miss Julia Owen—the youngest of the three sisters—emerging from a shady avenue and looking hastily up and down the gravel walk which she now entered. Observing that the coast was clear, she continued her way towards a garden-seat placed against the boundary-wall at the extremity of the gravel walk; and flinging

herself on the bench, she consulted a watch which she took from her bosom.

"'Tis close upon the hour when he promised to meet me," she murmured to herself. "But wherefore is it that I am thus before the time? Ah! 'tis because I love him—because he is handsome—yes, nobly handsome!"

And then the young lady suddenly gave the rein to her imagination, which was hot and fervid as that of her two elder sisters; and allowing her fancy thus to run riot in conjuring up the joys which she believed might be experienced in the arms of the individual whose image was uppermost in her thoughts, she became the prey to longings as ardent and desires as devouring as those of Messalina.

Although it was the hour of sunset the heat was stifling: no breeze came from the mountains in the distance, nor ruffled the surface of the lake that lay sleeping tranquilly in its mighty bed. The frenetic fervour of Julia's unruly passions made the blood course with the fury of fever-heat in its crimson channels; and to obtain air she threw off her bonnet and shawl, thus remaining in the elegant evening costume in which she had ere now issued from the dining-room. She felt that her cheeks were flushed—she knew that her eyes were swimming in a wanton languor—and as she bent down her looks she could catch the quick risings and sinkings of her bosom which the low-bodied dress revealed in most luxurious exposure. She therefore knew that at this moment she was beautiful—very beautiful; and wishing to produce a certain impression upon the mind as well as the senses of him whom she was expecting, she murmured between her coral lips, "I wish that he would come!"

Scarcely was the desire thus expressed when the sound of footsteps on the other side of the wall reached her ears; and as she looked up she almost immediately encountered the fine dark eyes of him whose presence she was anxiously awaiting.

Standing upon the stump of a tree on the outer side of the wall, the lover was enabled thus to look over that barrier: and Julia, lightly springing upon the seat, thus raised herself to the same level. Then followed what was so truly natural when a gentleman half scales a wall on one side and a lady does the same on the other: that is to say, their lips met in speedy contact and were glued together in one long delicious kiss.

"Dearest Julia—again am I rendered supremely happy!"

"And I, dearest Charles—am I not happy also?"

These were the first words that they exchanged—and their lips once more glued together, remaining in contact this time even longer than at first.

"May I not leap this wall and join you in the garden?" asked the Earl of Curzon—for he indeed was Julia's admirer.

The look which she flung upon him conveyed the answer even before her lips could frame one; and vaulting lightly over the wall, he stood on the garden seat by her side. Then as they sank down thereon to a sitting posture, he seized her in his arms strained her with every appearance of the fondest rapture to his breast—and covered her cheeks, her lips, and her brow with kisses.

When we parted yesterday, my dear Charles," said Julia, at length breaking the silence which had been sealed by such rapturous caresses,—“you told me that you had something most important and most serious to speak to me about; and although I besought you to tell me then what it was you had thus to communicate, you perferred that we should meet expressly for the purpose this evening.”

"True, dearest girl!" answered the Earl; with his arm thrown round her slender waist and her head pillowed upon his shoulder, so that her brow rested against his cheek. "Because I wished by such an intimation to prepare your mind for the very serious subject whereon it now becomes necessary that we should discourse."

"Proceed, my dear Charles," said Julia, now gazing up into his countenance: "for I see by your looks that you have no evil intelligence to impart."

"I am not so sure that you will think so, Julia," replied the Earl. "At all events listen."

"What! is it indeed so *very* serious!" she exclaimed, now showing signs of uneasiness. "Oh! am I about to waken from a delicious dream—a dream of love—"

"Only to make that dream a reality, if you choose," interrupted Lord Curzon, once more straining her to his breast.

"Oh! with this assurance I am already consoled—I am already happy," exclaimed Julia, lavishing upon him the tenderest caresses, so that he would indeed have been but little experienced in the female character were he not able to comprehend that he had only to seek the crowning bliss when he choose in order to obtain it.

"Two months have now elapsed, my dearest Julia," he resumed, "as he retained her, all vibrating with desire, in his arms—since first we encountered each other. Beneath the glorious sun of Italy—in the peerless city of Milan—did I first meet you; and the moment my eyes singled you out as it were from the midst of the royal retinue, I thought to myself that it would be happiness supreme to win the love of such a bewitching creature as thou! You remember how I subsequently introduced myself—how you repulsed me at first—then how you were led to look more favourably upon me—"

"Yes—because I saw that you were handsome, and that your manners were fascinating," observed Julia in a low tremulous voice. "From the very first moment I was interested in you—but I dared not all on a sudden receive the advances of a stranger. But when you told me who you were and besought me to give you a hearing, did I refuse you?"

"No—I have not the slightest complaint of cruelty to make against you," responded the Earl of Curzon. "On the contrary, in revealing my name it was reminding you also of the disadvantage under which I laboured in thus addressing a young lady—"

"You mean," observed Julia, with a tender look, "that at the same time you made yourself known to me, it of course occurred to my recollection that there was such a lady as the Countess of Curzon in existence, and that therefore you were married! But even *then*, did I prove cruel? did I repulse you? did I flee from your presence? No. Nevertheless, had I behaved as woman *ought*—not perhaps always as woman *does*—I should have assumed a haughty air and an indignant look, and have demanded by what right you—a married man—dared venture to breathe the language of flattery; when evidently meant as a prelude to the more tender whisperings of love, in the ears of a young lady, unmarried—occupying an honourable post about the person of the Princess of Wales—Oh! in such terms, as these would I have addressed you, Charles, had it not been that my heart was smitten by a sentiment which, in its very weakness, was stronger than that of womanly prudence and propriety! But what must you think of me for this conduct on my part?—what can your opinion be of one who has encouraged you to follow her from Italy—through Switzerland—hither to Geneva?"

"What is my opinion?" exclaimed the Earl: "it is that you are adorable, and that I adore you! It is that so much love on your part deserves every possible manifestation of love on mine; it is that inasmuch as you have been prepared to make such sacrifices for me, there is no sacrifice which I ought to hesitate to make for you! For in loving me, you love one who cannot conduct you to the altar: you love one who cannot give you the honoured name of wife! And in loving me, also, you place yourself in a position to preclude an honourable marriage with any other suitor who may present himself. Your love then for me—if you abandon yourself to it entirely—amounts to what the word will call your *ruin*: and therefore, if you are indeed prepared to make these tremendous sacrifices for me, what should not I do for you? You renounce the chance of obtaining a husband who would love, cherish, and protect you—and I therefore must renounce the wife whom I possess. This then is the serious matter concerning which I was so anxious to speak to you. It was to propose that, if you be as sincere as I am—as sincere as I think you—we at once resolve to renounce all the world for each other —"

"Oh! this language pours like a flood of elysian rapture into my heart," exclaimed Julia, in tones of thrilling joyousness. "Yes—for my part I will renounce all and everything for thee:"—and she pressed herself closer to the Earl, as if willing and anxious to abandon herself to him then and there, so as to crown the tender compact,

"Dearest, dearest Julia," he said, lavishing upon her caresses as tender as those which she expended upon him were wanton and provocative: "now you are holding out to me hopes of ineffable bliss. But—" and his voice suddenly sank to a low and mysterious whisper—"it is not merely the sacrifice of your honour, Julia, which is involved in all this: it is the sacrifice of all your future prospects—your family—sisters—friends—position—hopes of aggrandizement—"

"I do not think that I altogether understand you, Charles," said the young lady, now fixing upon him a look of mingled doubt and uneasiness. "Pray explain yourself. Already is suspense amounting to an agony—"

"I mean then, dearest Julia," answered the Earl of Curzon, "that the sacrifice we make for each other must be complete—You must fly away with me from Geneva—"

—you must abandon everybody and everything in order to be mine wholly—and only mine——”

“What! and live with you openly as your mistress?” exclaimed Julia, astonished but not shocked—amazed but not indignant.

“Most assuredly,” responded the Earl. “But you have put my meaning into words more plainly explicit than any I should have ventured to use. It is better however that the matter should thus be placed on a perfectly intelligible footing. I love you, Julia—I have already convinced you that I love you! For the last two months I have followed you from place to place—and in order not to compromise you in any way, or to have it even suspected that I was hanging on the outskirts of the Princess’s retinue, as it were. I have submitted to some annoyances and humiliations. Travelling in a humble style—adopting a feigned name—burying myself in an obscure lodging at Geneva—remaining cooped up in that lonely place nearly all the day long in order to avoid recognition on the part of any English persons who might happen to be sojourning in the city or passing through it—stealing out only along with the bats and owls of an evening—sometimes—fortunate enough to meet you alone—at others compelled to content myself with beholding you at a distance, or else to return home again disappointed at not meeting you at all—in fact, playing a hide-and-seek game in which all the advantages of rank and money are totally absorbed, and a complete barrier raised between myself and every legitimate pleasure and enjoyment, save and except when in your society—and *then* indeed,” he added in a softer tone, “and I amply rewarded——”

“Oh! I am aware, dearest Charles, of the sacrifices you have thus made for me,” exclaimed Julia; “but you must not blame me if I cannot always either keep an appointment or withdraw myself from immediate attendance upon her Royal Highness——”

“Blame you—no, dearest! I do not blame you,” interrupted the Earl. “But what I mean you to understand is, that the sort of life I have lately been leading cannot possibly continue. Though my love is illimitable, my patience is not proportionate. Now then, can you not understand wherefore I said at the beginning of this interview that the topic of our discourse would be a serious one? Indeed the time is come for us to take some decisive step——

“And that decisive step!” said Julia, gazing upon him with mingled uneasiness and mournful affection.

“I have already explained it to you, my dear girl,” answered Curzon. “It is that you will accompany me hence—that you will fly away—resign your position in the household of the Princess—and abandon everything for my sake——”

“No, no—I cannot do all this!” cried Julia, with an affected excitement, but with a real feeling of anguish—for she had taught herself to love the Earl of Curzon. “I cannot abandon my post here. For your sake—yes, assuredly I would—heaven knows I would. But there are other reasons—other considerations——”

And she stopped suddenly short as the wild rapidity of her emotions was about to hurry her upon delicate ground.

Then you do not love me, Julia, as I love you,” exclaimed the Earl, “Farewell—farewell!”

Rising abruptly from the bench, he stooped down—imprinted a kiss upon the forehead of the bewildered girl—and leaping on the back of the seat, vaulted over the wall.

“Farewell—farewell!” he once more exclaimed from the opposite side: and then his retreating steps smote upon Julia’s ear.

Now she felt all in an instant that she loved him madly, with a passion which she fancied to be altogether independent of the more sensuality of desire: and springing upon the garden-seat, she looked over the wall waving her handkerchief with frantic gestures—for she had presence of mind sufficient to make her aware how dangerous it would be to call after him by name.

He turned his head—he saw her—and he retraced his steps. Another minute—and he was again standing on the stump of the tree on the other side of the wall. Once more too were their hands locked in a warm clasp.

“Could you leave me thus, Charles?” she murmured in a tremulous tone.

“Need I repeat, dear Julia, all that I have said to you this evening?” he asked.

“If you love me you will fly hence with me. It is impossible that I can continue this existence of mingled excitement and despondency—light and darkness—bliss in your society, and long hours of loneliness in an obscure lodging—prowling, lurking, and sneaking about like a robber—No, no—I cannot endure it. Say then—will you be mine—wholly mine? or shall we separate at once and for ever?”

Thus speaking, the Earl of Curzon bent down his head and pressed his lips to Julia's hand and during the few moments that thus elapsed, a myriad thoughts swept through her brain.

Should she abandon all the dreams of ambition for this love of hers?—should she give up the brilliances of a Court-life for the obscurities of a nobleman's mistress? Should she do a temporary violence to her feelings *now*, by resigning her lover?—or to gratify her passion, should she perhaps plunge into a career of continuous vexations, annoyances, and troubles? Such were the questions that rushed through her mind—worldly thoughts strangely commingling with woman's deepest feelings. But all of a sudden it struck her that the best course would be to gain a delay—and she resolved to make the endeavour.

"Well, Julia, what is your decision?" asked the Earl of Curzon, again raising his head and looking her anxiously in the face.

"There must be mutual concessions," she answered; then bending down her eyes and with a blush of soft sensuousness rising to her cheeks, she murmured, "I am yours now—your wife—your mistress—or whatever title you choose to give me: but you must allow me a short time—say a few weeks—a month at the least—to make certain arrangements here, ere I can possibly leave—"

"Arrangements!—what arrangements can you possibly have to make, Julia?" exclaimed the Earl, with an air of surprise. "I hope that you do not intend to reveal the secret of our love to a living soul?"

"Not for worlds!" answered Julia.—"I cannot be explicit now—another time perhaps—"

"Julia," said the Earl, in a tone of reproach, "you have secrets from me! Yes—that blush upon your cheek confirms my suspicions.—But fool that I am!" he suddenly exclaimed; "what right have I to expect your confidence under present circumstances? Tell me Julia—if I consent to your proposal—if I agree to prolong my hide-and-seek sojourn in Geneva for another month—will you give me your entire confidence—tell me everything—"

"I will, I will" answered Julia, pressing his hand to her lips. "Oh! now you have made me so happy—so very, very happy!—you have promised to grant me a month ere I leave the Princess for ever to become your mistress openly—"

"And in the meantime, said the Earl in a subdued voice and with a look so full of wicked meaning that Julia's eyes sank

beneath it, though rather to veil the ineffable joy that thrilled through her than from any sense of shame which she experienced,—“in the meantime, dearest you will grant me the privileges of that love which exists between us and which places us on the same footing as man and wife—”

But we need not extend this chapter to any greater length. Suffice it to say that in the same way as her sister had done towards Colonel Malpas, did Julia Owen murmuringly breathe the requisite instructions to the Earl of Curzon how to obtain admission to her chamber that night at an hour when there need be no fear of observation.

CHAPTER CXXVI.

THE EARL'S LODGING.

It was yet dark, but fast verging toward the dawn, when the Earl of Curzon stole forth from the villa, and hastily threading the garden scaled the wall at the very spot where the bench was so conveniently situated within, and the stump of the tree so suitably placed without. On thus stealthily quitting the grounds, he skirted the wall for some short distance with a view to gain that bye-road which led through the fields to Geneva, and which Mrs. Ranger and Agatha took on the night of their visit to Dr. Maravelli.

But just as he reached that road, the morning broke suddenly above the eastern heights and the orient heaven became all in a moment so beautifully streaked with orange, and purple, and crimson, and gold, that the Earl paused to survey the spectacle. And so glorious was it that it even chased from his mind the pleasing sensations which a night of rapture in Julia's arms had left behind. All in a sudden, however, his admiring reverie was interrupted by the opening of the private door in the wall looking upon the narrow road. A tall individual, wearing a cloak, issued forth: and the Earl, throwing upon him a rapid sidelong look, was about to hurry away when the glimpse which he thus caught of that person's features made him gaze again more scrutinizingly still: then startled with astonishment, he ejaculated within himself: "By heaven; 'tis Malpas—or I never saw him before in all my life!"

Again the Earl looked—and this third survey convinced him that it was indeed the Colonel, although divested of his moustache and looking stouter and better than he had ever seemed before. And Malpas it assuredly was, as the reader may easily suppose: nor was his astonishment less at thus beholding the Earl than was the Earl's on recognizing him. It was evident that Malpas, taken too much by surprise to hasten off in the first instance or conceal his face in the collar of his cloak, was now irresolute what course to adopt—whether to accost the Earl or to beat a retreat,—while on other hand, Curzon himself was equally undecided what line of conduct to pursue.

With all his faults—and the reader knows they are many—Curzon entertained a boundless contempt for the paltry and rascally conduct which Malpas had shown in his endeavour to obtain the six thousand guineas wagered at the memorable “banquet of six.” Moreover, he beheld in Malpas the paramour of his wife—the author of that dishonour which he felt so keenly, but of which he had no positive proof. Without recapitulating causes, however, suffice it to say that, for many reasons the Earl of Curzon hated and detested Colonel Malpas; and under ordinary circumstances he would either have passed him by with supreme contempt, or else have picked a quarrel with him for the purpose of avenging the sense of dishonouring wrong that rankled in his heart. All this, however would have been very well in London, where it was quite natural for the Earl and the Colonel to meet a dozen times in a week: but here—in such a far distant place as the city of Geneva—it was altogether another thing. Colonel Malpas had just issued stealthily forth from the villa; and Curzon was seized with an irresistible curiosity to penetrate not only into the cause of Malpas's presence at Geneva, but more especially of his evident intimacy at the residence of the Princess of Wales.

“Can it be possible that his mission is the same as mine, and springing from the same authority?” murmured the Earl hastily to himself and without any farther hesitation, he at once accosted the Colonel saying, “it would be useless to pretend not to recognise each other.”

“Well, now I receive the confirmation of a suspicion,” ejaculated Malpas.

“And what it is that suspicion?” demanded Curzon in surprise.

“That I have once or twice seen you from a distance lurking about the villa—”

“Ah! then *you* must also have been lurking about this same villa,” interrupted the Earl. “Come—I see that it is better you and I should have some little explanation with each other. At all events let us not be seen loitering here now, since the day is dawning grandly. Does your road lie towards Geneva?”

“It does,” responded Malpas; but he hesitated for a moment and looked uneasily towards the garden door from which he had just issued.

“I see what you mean,” exclaimed the Earl, instantly comprehending the cause of Colonel's confusion: “the key which gave you egress is still in your hand, and you have something to do with it. Come—do not mind me: place it according to any previous understanding that may have existed between yourself and the lady who lent it to you.”

The Colonel laughed significantly, as he observed, “Perhaps the good luck which you have experienced induces you to suspect the nature of mine—and may be you also have just issued from the villa, though by means of some other mode of egress!”

“Put by the key,” said the Earl somewhat impatiently; “and we will talk of these matters anon.”

“Colonel Malpas accordingly, and without any farther hesitation, now deposited the key under the door; and having done this, he accompanied the Earl away from the vicinage of the villa.

“Will it not appear strange,” said Curzon suddenly, when they had got to a little distance along the road through the fields, “if you and I are seen entering Geneva together at such an unseemly hour? Perhaps you will come at eight o'clock and breakfast with me: we can then talk over such matters as we may choose to introduce upon the *tapis*.”

“Be it so,” said Colonel Malpas. “The police are vigilant and strict—”

“Yes—and especially as I happen to be living here under a false name—”

“'Tis exactly the same with myself!” cried Malpas.

“Then all the better reason wherefore we should avoid any unnecessary discussions with the police,” observed Curzon, “especially as the Syndics are very severe towards all foreigners having false passports. I am passing under the common and euphonious name of *Mr. Smith*; and here is the card of my address. You can join me there at eight o'clock.

"Punctually," rejoined Malpas: "and when your servant announces *Mr. Thompson*, you may know that it means me."

They then separated—the Earl of Curzon diverging across the fields, and Colonel Malpas continuing his way along the road. And here we may observe that it was only with a sort of cool politeness, and not with the familiarity of former times, that his lordship had demeaned himself towards the Colonel, who on the other hand was so rejoiced to find that he was not "cut" by one of the most aristocratic of his old acquaintances, that he would not for a moment perceive there was anything at all reserved or distant in the nobleman's manner.

But we shall now follow the Earl of Curzon. In ten minutes he entered Geneva; and striking into a neighbourhood which if not exactly low, at all events was very far from being one of the most aristocratic quarters, he presently knocked at the door of a house of plain and decent appearance. After being kept waiting for sometime—the inmates of the dwelling not being up, as it was still very early in the morning—the nobleman was admitted by a pretty-looking and mischievous eyed Genevese girl of about eighteen, and who had just hurried on a sufficiency of raiment to develop rather than to conceal the symmetry of her charming form. The Earl cast upon her a look of sly meaning, thereby proving that they were not altogether the worst friends in the world; and muttering something about having been kept up all night in attendance upon a sick friend, he passed into a small but neatly furnished parlour, which, together with a still smaller but equally cleanly bedroom at the back, constituted his lodging.

Having given the pretty Genevese some hurried commands relative to preparations for breakfast at eight o'clock, and also with regard to the prompt admission of a certain *Mr. Thompson*, when he should call, his lordship (who, be it remembered, was plain *Mr. Smith* at this lodging) proceeded to refresh himself with his wonted ablutions and perform his morning toilette. Meanwhile he revolved in his mind the manner in which he ought to proceed towards Malpas and the extent to which it would be prudent to confide in him: but he found, upon reflection, that these were points which must be left to the dictation of circumstances and would materially depend upon the amount of knowledge which the Colonel himself possessed with

regard to the business in which he was engaged on the Continent.

Punctually at eight o'clock did Malpas make his appearance;—and as he entered the Earl's neat little parlour, he exclaimed, "Ah! I can understand the attraction which has fixed you at this humble tenement. By heaven! such a pair of bright eyes—such coral lips—such pearly teeth—and such a roguish smile—"

"Hush!" said Curzon: "the girl understands a little English. But come—sit down," he continued, in a somewhat more friendly tone than he had adopted ere now; "and if your appetite be as good as mine, you cannot fail to do justice to this admirable specimen of a Swiss breakfast."

"My morning's walk has indeed sharpened my appetite," said Malpas, as he seated himself at the table: "and really humble though your lodging be—the service of the board is conducted in a superior style."

The nobleman and his guest now proceeded to do ample justice to the cutlets, the fresh eggs, the fish, the rolls, and the coffee:—and when the repast was concluded, the Earl said, "Now Malpas, we will have a little serious conversation, if you please."

"I think it is highly necessary, after the singularity of our encounter this morning at sunrise," observed the Colonel.

"But let us begin with a complete and thorough understanding of the principles on which it is to be conducted," resumed the Earl. "I mean to say—shall we throw off all reserve and give each other our entire confidence?"

"I scarcely know how to answer that question," replied Malpas, looking at the Earl in a peculiar manner. "Do you mean with regard to this morning's adventure?"

"I mean with regard to everything," replied the Earl, "not only what we were both doing at the villa this morning, but what we are doing at Geneva at all."

"Then you must suspect something?" said Malpas determined to proceed guardedly, in case the Earl should have merely been delegated by a *certain person* in London to put his (the Colonel's) trustworthiness and fidelity to the test.

"Yes—I *do* suspect something," responded Curzon, with a significant look: "and this is that you and I are both engaged in the same mission, although perhaps we were not aware of each other's connexion with the business until this morning."

"You have spoken exactly my sentiments," said Malpas.

"Shall we then given each other our confidence?" asked Lord Curzon.

"I have no objection—provided you can show me that I am safe in doing so—"

"Ah!" ejaculated the Earl: "I understand you. On embarking in this enterprise you pledged yourself to secrecy—"

"Just so," rejoined Malpas: "and it is that secrecy which I am now afraid of violating."

"Perdition!" exclaimed the Earl, petulantly. "I was not aware that you were such a stickler for principle! But come—this fencing with each other is a mere idle waste of time," continued Lord Curzon, suddenly adopting a milder tone: "for we are sure to come to the point at last. I also have pledged myself to secrecy in this matter: and therefore whatever amount of confidence we may show each other, we are alike guilty of breach of faith towards our employer—alike incur the same chance of that employer's displeasure—and alike stand the same risk of being betrayed by the other."

"True!" said Malpas: "and therefore let us advance by equal steps along the road of explanations so that we shall soon ascertain whether we keep pace with each other in the details of the knowledge which we may each possess relative to the nature, aim and object of our present missions."

"Your proposition is a reasonable one," said the Earl of Curzon. "And now, by way of making a start, I will confess that the employer to whom I have alluded is Lady Sackville."

"Mine also," responded Malpas: "and when I undertook the mission, her ladyship enjoined me to observe the strictest secrecy concerning it to whomsoever I might meet abroad, and likewise to shun as much as possible any of my English acquaintances whom I might chance to encounter."

"The same instructions were given to me," resumed Curzon, "coupled with the earnest recommendation to carry on all my proceedings with the stealthiness of a spy and the secrecy of a bravo—to prefer lurkings and watchings by night to any espials by day—to take a feigned name—preserve a strict *incognito*—live humbly and lodge obscurely, so as to avoid attracting especial notice—and carefully refrain from communication with any one who, being in a position to recognise me, might mention the fact of writing to friends in England."

"All these tally perfectly with my instructions," observed Malpas. "The object of this mission of mine is a most delicate one. I set out from England with orders to repair to the south of Europe—ascertain where her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales was residing at the time and by some means or other form an acquaintance with one of three young ladies——"

"The Misses Owen," added Curzon. "My instructions were precisely the same. I had already heard something of that Owen family, although personally unacquainted with either of the ladies; and I was not altogether surprised when Lady Sackville assured me that these three sisters are anything but patterns of virtue. Her ladyship accordingly led me to expect that I should probably experience but little difficulty in forming an intimate acquaintance with one of them, whichever it were that accident might first thrown in my way——"

"All these representations were likewise made to me," interrupted Malpas: "and indeed, I have found that every syllable Lady Sackville uttered relative to the Owens—that is to say, judging by the beautiful Emma——"

"And I, judging by the tender and somewhat sentimental Julia," observed the nobleman, "in whose arms I experienced elysian raptures during the past night——"

"Then were we close neighbours" continued Malpas: "for Emma told me that her room was next to Julia's—and in Emma's arms have I been sleeping for the last seven nights."

"I know not how you fared with your Emma," resumed the Earl of Curzon; "but I am afraid that I shall have some difficulty in bending Miss Julia to my purposes."

"My instructions were to some extent of a two-fold character," observed Malpas, taking up the thread of the discourse in his turn. "Lady Sackville directed me either to insinuate myself completely into the confidence of one of these Owen girls—glean from her all the secret proceedings of herself and sisters—and frustrate to the best of my endeavour those designs which should militate against the welfare and interests of the Princess of Wales——"

"Or else," resumed the Earl, "if you could not succeed in winning the confidence of one of the Miss Owens, you were to take a bold and desperate step towards

your fair one—I mean nothing less than persuading her to elope with you.”

“True!” ejaculated Malpas: “those were precisely the instruction which I received from Lady Sackville—and it is easy to comprehend that your’s were exactly the same. But for my part I have made but little progress with Miss Emma in any other matter than that of love. In amorous play and wanton sport she is proficient enough: nor indeed am I the first tutor the benefit of whose training she has enjoyed in that respect. On the contrary, the true pattern of a Court beauty is she—all wickedness and no virtue—a Maid of Honour in name only—a perfect demirep even at her tender age—”

“I cannot give my Julia a much better character,” remarked the Earl of Curzon; “save and except that I must do the girl credit for the endeavour to conceal her natural wantonness as much as possible. Besides, I really do believe that she loves me; and to tell you the truth, I entertain something more than a mere transient passion for her. Not that I actually love her in the true sense of the word; but I like her, and should be by no means sorry to have her as a mistress for six months or so. But until yesterday I could never even contrive to give the conversation such a turn as to make her admit that she had certain secrets which she kept from me: and from her manner I am afraid that I shall have much trouble in extracting any revelations at all. I have proposed that she shall elope with me: but she has insisted upon a month’s delay.”

“As for Emma—when I ventured to speak to her about her position in the Princess’s household,” resumed Malpas, “with the hope of drawing her into a conversation upon the subject, she has always avoided the discourse in some mischievously mirthful manner: and when I have proposed, since we have grown *particularly* intimate during the past week, that she should fly away with me, she has burst out laughing in my face, with an inquiry why we cannot be just as happy in each other’s arms beneath the roof of the villa as in my dwelling-place to which I might propose to transport her? Thus stands the affair with me and after more than three months’ absence from England, during which I have been for upwards of nine weeks dancing attendance on Miss Emma, the real and actual business of my mission remains just where it was.”

“And I am bound to make precisely the same admission,” observed the Earl.

“Now it is quite clear that Lady Sackville is friendly to the Princess of Wales—”

“No doubt,” exclaimed Malpas: “and she is aware of certain covert designs which are entertained against her Royal Highness’s peace and comfort. Of those designs it is evident enough that the three Owens are the instruments and agents: and it is either to paralyze their efforts while they are in the Princess’s service, or else to remove two of them altogether from the sphere of their mischievous intents, that you and I have been entrusted with our present missions.

“You have put the whole affair into a nutshell, so far as explanation goes,” remarked the Earl of Curzon; “and it is quite clear that as the business is of the most delicate, peculiar, and even curious nature, Lady Sackville adopted every precaution to prevent you and me from making any revelations to each other or comparing notes of the subject. But there is the third sister Agatha—I wonder whether any steps have been taken towards her—”

“Perhaps not,” remarked Malpas: “at all events it may be supposed that Lady Sackville, in laying her plans, calculated that either you or I would be certain to glean the secrets of these sisters through the medium of at least one of them, and thereby frustrate all proceedings in any way hostile to the Princess.”

“Or also,” remarked the Earl, “Lady Sackville perhaps calculated that if you and I succeeded in persuading two of the sisters to elope with us, the one who was left would be rendered powerless for mischief when deprived of the aid of her sister-accomplices.”

“Thus far,” said Malpas, “our confessions have advanced concurrently, step by step, on either side. For my part I do not mind adding that when my mission is over, whichever way it may end, I shall look for a handsome reward. Of course if I am to end by persuading Miss Emma to elope with me and become my mistress altogether openly, and avowedly, somebody must furnish me with the means of keeping her: and who is to do this if not the lady at whose instigation I shall incur such an incumbrance?”

“Then I am to understand,” remarked Curzon, “that you have had no specific reward promised you? I am in the same position: I have stipulated nothing, but have left matters to Venetia’s generosity. Of course she can obtain every thing she asks for from the Princes; and I do not think that a Marquisate with some good

sinecure of three or four thousand a year, will be too much for all the anxiety, trouble, and annoyance I am undergoing. As for Julia, it would be necessary to provide for her hereafter, should she become my mistress openly: and of course Venetia will furnish the means for all this."

"Lady Sackville *must* do it," observed Malpas, his lip curling with a peculiar smile of maginant triumph: "for do you not see, Curzon, that she has placed herself entirely in our power? In the course which she is pursuing she is secretly befriending the Prince of Wales; and therefore she is opposing herself to the Prince."

"Yes," exclaimed Curzon. "But I do not suppose that you will find it necessary to use threats or coercion towards Lady Sackville in order to obtain suitable recompense for your present services. But, by-the-bye, was it she who released you from your little difficulties?—and if so, how on earth did you manage to insinuate yourself again into her favour?"

"Oh! I managed to make my peace with her" exclaimed Malpas, assuming a self-sufficient air. "But as for the way I got out of the King's Bench," he continued, inwardly chuckling at the idea of being asked the question by the husband of the very woman who had transmitted him the means for the purpose,—*"that was of course done through my own resources."*

"Well, well, we need not wander away from the immediate topic of our discourse," exclaimed the Earl of Curzon. "From all that has now taken place between us, it is pretty clear that our mission on the Continent is the same—that we are acting according to the instructions of the same employer—and that our pursuits, in fact, have become identical. Perhaps, all things considered, we may further our views by consulting each other, and to a certain extent acting in concert—although of course it must remain a profound secret from everybody that we have thus met. Not a word to Emma on your side—not a word to Julia on mine: and in our communication with Lady Sackville—for I presume you write to her occasionally, as I also do—not a syllable must slip from the pen calculated to betray the circumstance of our meeting and the good understanding which has resulted. In more ways than one we may serve each other's views."

"Assuredly so," responded Malpas, inwardly rejoicing at being thus restored to so friendly a footing with the Earl of Curzon. "And now let us deliberate

upon the best manner in which we can proceed, so as to bring the business wherein we are concerned to a speedy issue."

"That is an aim most sincerely to be desired," ejaculated Curzon: for I am heartily sick of the hide-and-seek existence which I am leading; and were it not for present consolation in the shape of the charming Julia's favours, and the hope of future reward, I do not think that I could prosecute the business much farther. But what can you suggest?—how can we possibly compel either of these sisters to be explicit as to their secret proceedings?"

"Our course is a difficult one," remarked Malpas. "Lady Sackville especially declared that she would not have me adopt direct and positive measures to expose these girls to the Princess."

"Neither would I do so," said Curzon, emphatically. "I would not treacherously betray Julia to her mistress, and thus cause the ignominious dismissal of the poor girl: but I would discover her secret, if possible, in order to frustrate the designs thus revealed. Or else—which is much better—I should like to contrive something that would bring matters to a crisis at once, and compel Emma to elope with you and Julia with me; so that the necessity should cease for this lurking, stealthy, sneaking, hole-and-corner kind of existence and that it should have an end."

"Well then, let us lay our heads together and see what we can think of," remarked Colonel Malpas, drawing his chair in a confidential manner still more closely to that of the Earl of Curzon.

But here we must leave Venetia's two emissaries for the present, to discuss their plans.—while we transport the reader's attention back to England.

CHAPTER CXXVII.

THE MAID OF HONOUR.

It will be remembered that amongst the letters which Venetia examined on the occasion when she received the pearls from Lord Leveson, was one written by Miss Bathurst strongly recommending the necessity of making immediate provision for Mrs. Arbuthnot and her daughter Penelope. Lady Sackville had accordingly used her influence with the Prince for this purpose; and the result was the appointment of Mrs. Arbuthnot to fill a

vacancy which occurred in the Queen's household by the resignation of Lady Prescott and the subsequent nomination of Miss Penelope to the post of Maid of Honour likewise in the Queen's establishment.

Lady Prescott had resigned her situation of Bed-Chamber Woman shortly after the scene at Lady Wenlock's, some particulars of which had got noised abroad: and thus was it that Mrs. Arbuthnot had been enabled to slide gently and comfortably into that berth. Behold therefore this lady and her daughter Penelope now fairly inducted into a Court life, through the influence of Venetia,—with good salaries, and handsome apartment at Windsor Castle.

Mrs. Arbuthnot was a woman who had long lived by being toady, duenna, or companion to those into whose households she could obtain recommendations or into whose favour she could ingratiate herself—and thus it was a most important event for her to obtain so good a situation as the one above mentioned. Thoroughly worldly-minded, and having too long been compelled to live upon her "wits" to have retained much of her originally good principles, she considered self-interest to be the dominant aim of existence; and when she gazed upon her daughter it was with the hope that she would make the best of the opportunity now afforded her to contract some advantageous marriage, or form some still more valuable *connexion*. For, be it understood that Mrs. Arbuthnot was one of those detestable mothers who would sooner see their daughters become the mistress of rich men than the wives of poor ones,—and Mrs. Arbuthnot did not fail to recommend Penelope to do her best to attract the notice of the royal princes—no matter which one—but the Prince Regent himself, if possible.

Miss Penelope was somewhat terrified by the manner in which her mother thus addressed her—for Mrs. Arbuthnot did not deem it necessary to adopt much ambiguity of language when inculcating her worldly doctrines. The young lady, being past twenty-five years of age, was quite old enough to understand her mother's meaning, and quite virtuous enough to recoil from it. She had little maudlin sentimentalism about her, and no prudery; but was not sufficiently depraved in mind to be willing to surrender up her person to the first princely bidder. The "innate virtue of the woman" was not totally spoilt within her, although she had

been placed in situations that fully opened her eyes to the intrigues and immoralities of fashionable life. She herself had however remained pure in body, and only partially contaminated in mind;—and at all events, as we have before observed, she possessed a sufficient amount of proper feeling to render her heartily ashamed of the base and almost undisguised recommendations proffered by her mother.

In personal appearance, Penelope was not exactly beautiful—nor yet handsome but she was a fine young woman, with a well developed figure, an animated countenance, luxuriant hair, and large bright eyes. She moreover possessed a brilliant set of teeth—a pair of ripe red lips, whence the most luscious kisses might to all appearances be culled—and a clear healthy complexion. Her voice was flute-like and well calculated to stir up the amorous emotions of the susceptible temperament: her arms were somewhat too robust for perfect symmetry, but splendidly rounded and brilliantly polished—and her feet and ankles were equally faultless in their sculptural perfection, though evidently belonging to limbs that were largely and even massively formed. Her bust was on the same fine scale—the bosoms being large without luxuriance, and full without any detriment to their firmness. There was a certain animation in her looks which might be mistaken at a first glance for boldness—but a close and steadier survey would show that it was only the liveliness of good spirits, commingling as it were with the thoughts that naturally belonged by the experience of a young woman who was already verging towards the ripe age of twenty-six.

Such was Penelope Arbuthnot: and when dressed in the tasteful elegance of her walking costume, with the long ringlets showering down from under the brims of a large fashionable bonnet—or arranged in the splendour of satin or velvet, when her toilette for the dinner-table or the evening party was completed—the new Maid of Honour was of striking and brilliant appearance. Indeed as she occupied her place at the royal dinner-table, or moved amidst the gay throng in the gilded saloon, she would have been pronounced a handsome woman by even a critical observer; and thus without actual perfection of features, but with only a tolerable regularity of profile, she was calculated to pass as one of the most brilliant ornaments of the Court and Fashion.

The Prince Regent had lately visited Windsor Castle much oftener than had

previously been his wont, because he was now, very seriously thinking of finding a husband for his daughter the Princess Charlotte, whose character was daily developing a higher spirit and a growing impatience of control. Being resolved to marry her off-hand, it became necessary for the Prince to make a fitting selection of a husband for her; and in this very important matter was it requisite that he should hold frequent consultations with his mother the Queen. Hence those numerous visits to Windsor which he had recently paid; and on these occasions he had been led to take special notice of Penelope.

When once the Prince Regent fixed his eyes upon a woman, it was with the resolve to possess her;—and to this end was his mind always made up whenever the fancy struck him, even before he bestowed a single reflection upon the means whereby his determination was to be carried out. As for being contented with one mistress—even though this mistress was the most transcendently beautiful woman that had ever yet shone in the circles of fashion—the idea was altogether out of the question: for when once away from Carlton House and beyond the influence of Venetia's smiles, the Prince Regent was as much inclined as ever to fulfil his destiny as the most insatiate and unprincipled voluptuary that ever disgraced the world.

It was now the middle of the month of March at about the same time that the events occurred at Geneva; and the weather in England was more than usually bleak and tempestuous. Thus was it that on the particular day the Prince Regent, having driven over at an early hour from London to Windsor, found himself compelled to remain longer than he had intended in the consequence of a sudden deluge of rain. Although he had made arrangements to return to Carlton House to hold a Privy Council, and afterwards to entertain a party at dinner, he declared "that both the Right Honourable Counsellors and the invited guests might go to the devil, sooner than he would run the chance of being dragged, even in a close carriage, along flooded roads and with the rain beating strong enough to drive in the windows." He accordingly remained to pass the day at Windsor Castle; and as in the evening there were no guests at the dinner-table—merely the Queen, the Princess Augusta, the Ladies, Lords, and Gentlemen of her Majesty's household—the Prince was enabled to place himself

next to Penelope. The King who was more than usually mad just at this period, and was prone to the performance of strange unkingly antics, was kept close in his own private apartment; and the Princess Charlotte, the Prince Regent's daughter, being somewhat indisposed, also remained in her own chamber.

The circle at the royal dinner-table was therefore limited upon this occasion and the Prince, being thus enabled the more easily to throw off all unnecessary ceremonial restraint, gave way to those gaities of conversation in which he excelled so much. Penelope not only possessed a natural flow of good spirits, but was also quick, sprightly, and ready-witted in her discourse; and she therefore shone on the present occasion to considerable advantage. The Prince was more than ever pleased with her;—and as he beheld the colour heightening upon her cheeks, enhancing the animation of her looks, and pouring additional floods of lustre into her fine eyes, he thought within himself that he had often taken the trouble to make a less worthy and desirable conquest than this.

Penelope, however, was perfectly innocent in thus developing her attractive qualities in so provocative a manner towards the Prince. She had no ulterior design—she did not even lay herself out to attract his notice: her behaviour was the natural and unstudied outpouring of good spirits, sufficiently tempered by proper taste and breeding. But at length, when she beheld the Prince's eyes settling with a peculiar look upon her, after the champagne had been handed to him three or four times, she instantaneously comprehended that it was quite possible for him to have put a wrong construction on her demeanour and discourse. She saw how the unaffected frankness of the former and the spontaneous sprightliness of the latter, might receive an evil interpretation in the mind of a man who was himself too much saturated with impure notions to be able to give others credit for innocence and purity of purpose; and when flinging her eyes across the table, Penelope beheld her mother gazing upon her with a satisfaction the nature of which was not to be mistaken, the young lady experienced a sudden shock that produced as it were a complete revulsion of feeling within her.

She however had too much good taste as well as self-possession to turn suddenly cold or distant: but she nevertheless gradually diminished the sprightliness of her conversation, while the blooming

animation of her countenance proportionately yielded to a modest composure. The Prince was too keen and sagacious in such matters not to perceive that her spirits had received a sudden chill; and he did his best to rally her: but she now replied with only a calm courtesy;—and soon afterwards the Queen, rising to retire from the drawing-room, was of course followed thither by all the ladies, Penelope being thus relieved from the embarrassment which she had experienced for the last quarter of an hour.

The Prince, who scarcely ever neglected his bottle even for the finest woman in existence, remained at table drinking with the lords and gentlemen of the royal household; but presently they repaired to the drawing-room, to rejoin the Queen and the ladies in attendance. On entering the spacious and gorgeously-furnished saloon, the Prince looked hastily around in search of Penelope; and to his chagrin he observed that she was occupying a seat as close as possible to the Queen,—so that even if he accosted her, he could not possibly breathe the slightest syllable in her ear without being overheard by his prim, starch, vinegar-looking mother. But alone on a sofa, at a considerable distance from the fire around which the rest of the royal party had gathered, Mrs. Arbuthnot was seated: and the Prince as if in a kindly patronising courtesy towards an elderly lady, went and placed himself by her side.

"Mrs. Arbuthnot," he said, throwing into his manner all the affability that was one of the ingredients of the hypocrisy which he knew so well how to assume for his own purposes,—*"I was much delighted in having the opportunity to use my influence with my august mother, and obtain for you that post which Lady Prescott so suddenly vacated."*

"And I am charmed," responded Mrs. Arbuthnot, "in having this opportunity of expressing to your Royal Highness the lively sense of gratitude which I experience for the favour thus shown to me: and likewise I must avail myself of the present occasion to thank you with equal sincerity on behalf of my daughter, for whom your Royal Highness was also graciously pleased to use your influence."

"Ah! your daughter—to be sure!" said the Prince, affecting to be reminded of what was full well known to him already: "that handsome young lady who sat next to me at the dinner-table just now, is your daughter—I recollect! By the bye, she was at Carlton House along with you, my dear

madam, that night when we had the private theatricals."

"To be sure, your Royal Highness," answered Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"Well, but I do not think that we all behaved very properly on that occasion—did we?" said the Prince: "after supper, if I remember right, there was some kissing and toying."

"Oh! yes—a little," observed Mrs. Arbuthnot. "But wherever your Royal Highness is, everybody is so gay and happy."

"Yes—but if your daughter is unmarried—and at her age too," said the Prince, lowering his tone, "that kind of amusement is rather dangerous. "Kisses, you know, my dear Mrs. Arbuthnot, are the flowers which one gathers on the threshold of paradise; but the bold and venturesome one often follows up the advantage, and taking elysium as it were by storm, plucks the forbidden fruit."

"I can assure you, sir," replied Mrs. Arbuthnot, "that my daughter—without being a prude, remember—is a young woman of prudence."

"No doubt of it Mrs. Arbuthnot," interrupted the Prince: "but——"

"And I was going to observe," continued the lady, "that although such little kissing, and toying, and trifling dalliances to which your Royal Highness has alluded, may smooth down all the asperities of a woman's virtue, yet still the virtue itself may remain intact."

"Though deprived of some of its strongest defences—eh? Is that your meaning, my dear madam?" inquired the Prince, laughing though speaking in a low and guarded tone.

"I think that such was my meaning," responded Mrs. Arbuthnot, also smiling, but with a sort of subdued significancy.

"How is it, my dear madam," asked the Prince; "that you have not managed to find a husband for your daughter yet?"

"Really your Royal Highness should direct Parliament to levy a tax upon bachelors," answered the Bed-chamber Woman, again smiling. "But it is strange, considering that Penelope has moved in the very best society—that she is highly accomplished—and, as your Royal Highness perceives, is not ill-looking."

"Ill-looking!" he echoed. "On the contrary—she is a very fine girl—a very fine girl—or young woman, rather—between five or six-and-twenty I should say if it were not rude to guess a lady's age—ripe as the peach——"

"As her mother, sir, I feel proud at the compliment that you thus pay my daughter: and though I say it, who am her parent, she is decidedly one of the finest figures I ever saw. Her milliner assured me this morning—But really, your Royal Highness must think me very indiscreet," said the wily woman, suddenly interrupting herself, and appearing to be much shocked at the idea of having committed a sad solecism in propriety and decency.

"Pray go on," said the Prince. "You were speaking with the very pardonable pride of a mother; and it pleases me to hear a fond and affectionate parent thus discourse. Pray go on, I repeat. You were telling me that your daughter's milliner passed some opinion? No doubt it was to the effect that Miss Penelope is one of the best made young ladies——"

"Now, to speak candidly, it *was* an observation to that effect," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, who from the corner of her eye was attentively watching all the evidences of those rising passions which she was thus methodically and cunningly provoking on the part of the Prince: then, as she observed the colour, deepening on his cheeks, the salacious sucking of his lips, and the glowing expression with which his eyes plunged across the room to fix themselves upon Penelope, she continued in a low and confidential whisper, "Indeed, sir, the milliner declared that of all the ladies belonging to the Court and Aristocracy who patronize her establishment, not one is so symmetrically and at the same time so finely formed as my daughter."

"You should marry her—you should marry her," said the Prince, in the hurried tone of his aroused desires. "It would be a positive sin to suffer such a splendid creature to stand the chance of dying an old maid."

"It is easy to say *marry her*," remarked the astute Mrs. Arbuthnot: "but it is not so easy to procure a good match and sooner than she should become the wife of a poor or obscure individual——"

"Ah! I perceive you are a lady of great prudence," observed the Prince, now beginning to entertain a faint suspicion that it was not altogether without a motive that Mrs. Arbuthnot had struck into this somewhat extraordinary line of discourse: but determined at once to put her to the test and ascertain whether his suspicion was well founded or not, he said in a low voice, and fixing a peculiar look upon her, "Some very prudent and careful mammas prefer that their daughters should be rich men's mistresses than poor men's wives."

"The morality may be bad," returned Mrs. Arbuthnot, perfectly unabashed, "but the worldly wisdom of the maxim cannot be disputed."

"Are you really serious in this observation?" inquired the Prince, with a certain purpose still more plainly expressed in his look.

"I can assure you, sir, I never was more serious in my life," responded the wily woman.

"But the maxim may be only one which you recommend to others," urged the Prince, "without perhaps any intention of practising it yourself"

"Then were my sincerity indeed something to be impugned," rejoined Mrs. Arbuthnot. "But 'tis otherwise. What I preach I am prepared to practise."

"And if some one were to put you to the test?" said the Prince, in a still more confidential tone than before.

"It all depends on who the person might be," was the immediate response.

"Let us suppose a case," resumed his Royal Highness. "We will, then, for argument's sake, imagine that one of my brothers—a Prince of the Blood Royal—should make overtures to Miss Penelope: as a matter of course it could not be for her to become his wife,—it must be to make her his mistress. Now, what would be the answer in such a case?"

"I cannot positively declare what my daughter's response would be," returned Mrs. Arbuthnot: "but I know very well that if I were consulted in the matter I should not only give my advice, but also use my influence to compel an affirmative reply."

"Now indeed may we soon understand each other," said his Royal Highness, speaking quickly and in a tone of excitement: "let us suppose that instead of being one of my brothers who made the overture whereof we have spoken, it was I—the Prince Regent—who ventured to breathe such a proposition in your ears relative to your handsome daughter Penelope!"

"I should consent at once and unhesitatingly," answered the worldly-minded mother: for she saw fully well that the Prince Regent was perfectly serious in what he said.

"Then, without another word, we understand each other," rejoined his Royal Highness, fixing upon her a look of the deepest meaning. "This night——"

"Yes—this night—if your Royal Highness wills it," answered Mrs. Arbuthnot, in a low but firm voice; then after a few

moments' hesitation, she said, "Her Majesty will doubtless retire early, as is her wont—and immediately afterwards I will represent to my daughter the honour which your Royal Highness intends her. Then if you will await me here, or in any other room, I will rejoin your Royal Highness as speedily as possible——"

"Good!" said the Prince. "But do you not observe how the handsome Penelope regards us at this moment? Is there not a certain uneasiness—a certain suspicion—in her looks?"

"Yes—there may be," replied the mother: "for I have already assured you, sir, that Penelope is a virtuous young woman."

"Though perhaps more or less prepared to lose her virtue when somewhat hardly pressed," added the Prince. "But here—within the walls of this castle—she is completely in my power. We will try persuasion first; and if that will not do, then force must be resorted to. But if you, as her mother, give your consent——"

"Let us hope that Penelope will too well appreciate the honour that is intended her," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, "not to receive your Royal Highness with suitable respect."

Then for some few minutes longer did the vile woman and the voluptuous Prince remain in deep and earnest discourse, until all the details of the infamous bargain were fully settled and the terms were fixed whereupon the mother was to surrender her daughter into the arms of the royal voluptuary.

CHAPTER CXXVIII.

THE MOTHER AND DAUGHTER.

It was eleven o'clock. The Queen had retired to her suite of apartments, attended by those ladies whose turn it was to wait upon her that night, while Penelope, withdrawing to her own chamber, was closely followed by her mother.

The bed-room allotted to the maid of honour was at the end of a long passage, and was situated in a somewhat retired position. It was in one of the oldest portions of the castle, and had a certain antique gloominess of appearance. The window was small—the walls were thick—and as the floor was below the level of the corridor communicating therewith, there was a descent of two or three steps

into the room. Altogether, it fully answered the description of one of those chambers which the imaginations of the romance-writer or novelist love to envelope in loneliness and mystery: but until this particular night Penelope had experienced no apprehension with regard to the secluded position and cheerless aspect of her apartment.

"Mother," said the young lady, the moment she and her parent entered the room, "I know not how it is, but I feel a presentiment of evil creeping over me:"—and she looked very hard in Mrs. Arbuthnot's face.

"Nonsense, my dear girl!" exclaimed the wily woman. "So far from evil threatening you, fortune is preparing to shed its golden beams upon your head."

"Ah!" ejaculated Penelope, with that abruptness of tone and sharp quick movement of the head which showed that from her mother's words she had just received the confirmation of a suspicion which had been haunting her all the latter part of the evening. "But perhaps you will explain yourself?" she added with assumed coldness.

"Penelope," responded her mother, "if you were a girl of sixteen or seventeen, I should experience some difficulty in entering upon a certain topic: but as you have reached an age at which your experience is to a certain extent matured, I need scarcely adopt any sophistry or circumlocution in order to explain my meaning. Besides, you have already comprehended it—I see by your manner what you have!"

"Yes—I am indeed fearful that I have replied the Maid of Honour: "and if my suspicion be true—if my surmise be correct—Oh, then it will be a sad and fatal hour for me—or it will teach me to despise and condemn, perhaps even to *hate* my own mother!"

"Penelope, this is ridiculous—this is preposterous—this is absurd on your part!" exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot. "It is impossible that you can in reality be so squeamish. When I had you up from the country first of all, to pass a few days with me at Acacia Cottage, did I not explain to you for what purpose I had been placed as a companion and duenna about the person of Venetia Trelawney, as Lady Sackville then was?—did I not tell you that it was destined for her to become the mistress of the Prince, to the consummation of which aim all arrangements were then tending?—and did you not appear to envy Venetia the brilliant position which her friends were endeavouring

to obtain for her? Did you not, moreover, aid me in flattering and complimenting her?—did you not also assist me in performing the part of a spy upon her actions, so as to prevent the probability of her escape from that track in which she was a mere puppet moving according to the will of those who secretly pulled the strings? Did you not, I ask, enter with spirit into all the proceedings whereof I am now speaking?"

"True!" cried Penelope, with evident impatience: then flinging her flashing looks upon Mrs. Arbuthnot, she exclaimed, "But all that is no reason why my own mother should make a bargain to sell me to the Prince of Wales!"

"Foolish girl!" immediately rejoined Mrs. Arbuthnot: do you mean to spurn the hand which fortune extends towards you? Pause for a moment and reflect. You have now an opportunity of rising to rank and fortune, like Venetia——"

"Aye—but Venetia was prudent enough to marry beforehand," cried Penelope, "and thus make the nuptial garment a cloak for her amour with his Royal Highness. Now, understand me well, mother! Were I married to a complaisant husband—like Horace, for instance—I should most probably tread precisely in Venetia's path if the opportunity were afforded: but I will not consent to be bought and sold in the manner which the Prince and yourself seem to have settled between you. Remember, the consequences of an amour to an unmarried woman may be disgrace and ruin! If Venetia should become a mother, there is a legitimate father for her child: but if my surrender were to involve me in such an embarrassment, should I not be ruined altogether? Besides, once for all, my mind revolts from the idea of being thus handed over to the arms of a sensualist: and thus you see, mother, I have quite prudence and virtue enough to tell you frankly that I am not yet prepared to become the mistress of the Prince!"

"Again I say that you are a foolish self-willed girl," exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot angrily. "Totally blind to your own interests, you will not listen to reason. Here you are, nearly twenty-six years of age—still unmarried—and still without a suitor for your hand. Although handsome, you are now no chicken, my dear: and being fortuneless, you have no special attraction to induce any rich nobleman to make you his wife. Believe me, then, your prospects with regard to marriage are by no means brilliant under present circumstances. As for your virtue it is no

recommendation now; because few will give you credit for possessing it at your age. But suppose you yield to the solicitations of the Prince—suppose that you become his mistress—we should take care to have the circumstance whispered about; and then many a younger son of the nobility will be anxious to secure your hand. Thus what you may call your *loss of virtue* would no doubt end in procuring you an excellent match; and thus also, by the sacrifice of your *honour*, will you exhibit the real prudence of a woman of the world."

"No—I cannot—I will not yield to this base and degrading sophistry!" exclaimed Penelope. "Now, mother, leave me! Another word from your lips upon this subject, and I shall hate you!"

"But, my dear Penelope," argued the vile woman, "do listen to reason——"

"God forgive you, mother, for thus seeking to prostitute your own daughter!" said the young lady, the tears running down her cheeks.

"Ah! you weep, my child—you weep?" said Mrs. Arbuthnot, a sudden thought inspiring her with a diabolic prompting how to turn this emotion on her daughter's part to serve the infamous purpose she had in view. "Yes—you weep, I say! But far more bitter will be your tears when you behold your mother suddenly stricken down by a misfortune the consequences of which will redound upon your own head."

"A misfortune!" ejaculated Penelope. "What mean you?"

"I mean, daughter," replied Mrs. Arbuthnot, "that I am threatened by a remorseless creditor—a creditor for a large sum, contracted some years ago—you remember when I was compelled to break up our establishment in Harley Street?"

"Yes, yes," said Penelope in the quick and excited tone of suspense. "Go on, mother—go on."

"Well, this creditor or whom I speak had lost sight of me until within these last few weeks: but now perceiving my name in the Court Circular, he has found me out—he has been to the castle—and he has declared that if within a week I pay him not the amount, he will have me dragged away to prison!"

"Heavens—the threatened disgrace!" ejaculated Penelope, in consternation.

"Yes," continued Mrs. Arbuthnot, now appearing to sob bitterly: "it would be my ruin—my utter ruin—and yours also,

unfortunate girl! You know how particular—how very particular the Queen is, and she would at once dismiss me from my situation. Then, how could you possibly retain yours? the sense of degradation and of shame would compel you to resign: you could not possibly remain at court while all the world knew that your mother was the inmate of a debtor's gaol!"

"But this debt, mother," exclaimed Penelope, with increasing excitement, "what is the amount?"

"Nearly four thousand pounds, with the interest," was the response; and Mrs. Arbuthnot continued to sob and rock herself to and fro on the chair in which she was seated.

"Four thousand pounds!" ejaculated Penelope, frightened at the magnitude of the debt. "And must it all be raised at one moment? Can we not mortgage our salaries, or a portion of them?"

"If we could, how should we be enabled to maintain our position at Court?" demanded Mrs. Arbuthnot. "Would you feel comfortable in being pointed at as shabby?—would you like to appear constantly in the same dresses—faded silks—soiled satins—dirty gloves—No, no,—it is ridiculous! Besides even if all this were possible, the creditor will not wait; he is merciless! A warrant is already issued against me—and the bailiffs will come to-morrow—"

"Good heavens, can all this be true?" cried Penelope, now a prey to the deepest anguish.

"True!" exclaimed her mother, with a start of apparent indignation and surprise. "Do you think that I would thus torture your feelings for mere amusement? But stop—I will fetch from my own room certain letters which will prove—"

"Enough, mother—I believe you!" said Penelope; her momentary incredulity suddenly dissipating in the presence of Mrs. Arbuthnot's tone, look, and manner. "But have you not applied to any of your friends? Lady Sackville—Miss Bathurst—Mrs. Fitzherbert—"

"My dear Penelope, I have applied to them all, and they cannot assist me. I am reduced to despair—and hence was it I know not exactly how it happened that the discourse gradually took the turn it did—but thus was it, I say, that I listened to the words which the Prince ere now breathed in my ears relative to yourself. For he declares that you are handsome—that he loves you—that he will seek opportunities of conferring all possible favours upon you—and that the individual

whom self-interest may induce to be your husband, shall have honours, and pensions heaped upon him. Thus may you, Penelope, become the rival of Lady Sackville: thus also may the husband whom you are certain to obtain, rise to a high position, like Lord Sackville—"

"Enough, mother!" exclaimed Penelope; appearing to be nerved with the sudden courage of a desperate resolve. "My mind is made up—that is to say, if the Prince, as I suppose, will relieve you from your embarrassment?"

"I have already told you as much," hastily responded her mother. "And therefore you consent" she demanded eagerly and greedily.

"Yes—I consent," answered Penelope, in a low voice, while upon her cheeks the colour went and came in rapid transitions. "'Tis better that I should do this than that we should both be ruined: 'tis better that I should make the sacrifice of all my most delicate feelings, than that we should be plunged into the depths of poverty."

"Ah! now you speak like a woman of sense," exclaimed Mrs. Arbuthnot then inclining towards her daughter, so that her lips nearly touched the young lady's ear, she said in a low and rapid voice, "But when the Prince comes to your chamber in a few minutes, let him not be received with coldness and reserve. Be not unto him inanimate and passionless as a marble statue—"

"Oh! leave me, leave me, mother!" exclaimed the young lady, shuddering all over with the deepest sense of humiliation and shame. "There is something dreadful—aye, even horrible—in hearing such injunctions come from the lips of a parent! Let it suffice that I sacrifice myself—"

"Well, well—I will say no more," interrupted Mrs. Arbuthnot: then hastily imprinting a kiss upon her daughter's cheek, she hurried from the chamber to carry the tidings of her success to the Prince Regent, who was impatiently awaiting her coming in the drawing-room where the evening had been spent by the royal party.

So soon as her mother had withdrawn, Penelope began to lay aside her apparel. She was armed as it were with the fortitude of a desperate resolution. Having made up her mind to the worst, she abandoned herself to the current of what appeared to be her destiny—or rather, to the control of the strong compulsion that ruled her with an imperious necessity. In such a mood did she gather up and arrange

the masses of her luxuriant hair for the night : and when in a state of semi-nudity she seated herself upon the couch to divest herself of her remaining apparel she could not help clasping her hands with a sudden paroxysm of anguish at the thought of all the circumstances under which she was about to surrender herself into the arms of the princely voluptuary.

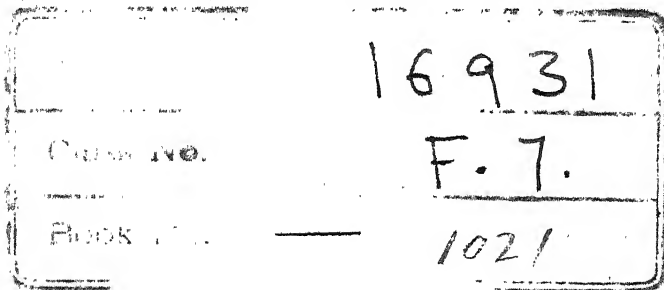
But at the same moment the door was gently opened—and his Royal Highness entered the chamber of the Maid of Honour.

The moment he flung his gaze upon Penelope, he devoured as it were all her charms with that rapid burning look. He beheld her indeed as finely formed as her wily mother had more than intimated that she was ; and as the wing of the bird sweeps over the surface of the sea, thus passing from wave to wave with whirlwind speed, so did the glance of the royal sensualist travel quick from charm to charm—from contour to contour—from shoulders of firmness and whiteness to breasts still more plump and dazzling, rising like two swelling globes from the surface of an ample chest—well divided—rich in their sculptural proportions without being too luxuriant—and each crowned with a delicate rosebud. Thence did his looks sweep along the white and

well-rounded arms so admirably modelled in their robustness—so glowing and warm even in their whiteness,—and belonging to a figure which, though somewhat largely proportioned was perfectly symmetrical and all the flowing outlines of which were developed by the drapery that hung loosely about it. Nor were the Prince's eyes averted or arrested in that first sweeping glance, ere they had likewise embraced the statuesque moulding of the lower limbs—so full and robust where fullness and robustness were proper—so slender where the well-turned ankles required such slenderness—and with the shapely feet so long and narrow !

Notwithstanding her hands were joined and her looks were mournful, when the eye of the Prince thus rapidly scanned all the charms that were more than half exposed, there was nevertheless a kind of languid voluptuousness which hung at the moment about that young woman, and which at once seized like the intoxicating influence of highly perfumed flowers upon the senses of the Prince : so that his brain appeared to reel for a moment as he paused upon one of the descending steps. But the next instant he sprang forward—he caught her in his embrace—he pressed her in his arms—and murmuring some tender syllables, he covered her with caresses.

END OF VOL. VII.



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